

Muffin Around

Peter Russell

SV Muffin, a Van De Stadt Ocean 22

Peter Russell, *SV Muffin*

Another baking hot afternoon in the early summer, the tears from the much anticipated goodbyes dried on my face as the hot pebbles of the beach warmed my bare feet. A final hug to my closest friends waiting on the beach, and along with two of them I bent down to pick up the dinghy. Doing my best to look forward as we left, I focused on the small white dot bobbing in the middle of the river. As my hand went numb from the outboard tiller vibrating she grew in size, drawing herself up to her full twenty two feet, a cruising machine, a machine of my making.

Early Days

As a young sailor I struggled in the worlds of cruising and yachting. It felt like the junior training scheme organised by the RYA was focused solely on dinghy sailing and racing, with no allowance or encouragement for youth yachting or cruising. Despite being reasonably experienced and knowledgeable for my age, I found that people wouldn't take me seriously, or would dismiss me entirely. This attitude annoyed me, and like many young teenagers I was hell bent on proving those both older and wiser than me wrong. Initially I set about doing this dinghy cruising, I rapidly found that planning and completing my own cruises required a lot more forethought and knowledge than I possessed. This left me more despondent as I felt like all I had done was prove myself wrong. Luckily for me I got the chance to turn my experiences around, for I was introduced to an extraordinarily generous man, Jon Stokes, a man without whom none of what you are about to read would have been possible. When I was only just seventeen, he decided to lend me his yacht, *Muffin*. She was for all intents and purposes a dinghy with a lid. She had only two beds, an anchor light, a depth sounder, a radio, an outboard and a suit of sails. Most would say she wasn't much, but she was enough for me, enough to start gaining my own experiences as a skipper, learning from my own mistakes, and having my own adventures.

A year later *Muffin* went back into the water a better boat. Over the winter I had persuaded Jon to allow me to make some modifications; she now had a chart plotter, a tricolour, a solar panel, and a compression post I had installed after noticing a crack forming in a structural bulkhead. Despite the improvements, she was still lacking in the performance department, at some stage the lifting component of her shallow fin keel had been fixed in the up position; this made rolling downwind easy, and she went like hell on a reach, but to windward she was notorious for a heavy helm, and making more leeway than a barrel on a boating lake.

Negatives aside, I don't think a more beautiful boat ever came off the design tables at E.G. Van de Stadt and co, and on cold dark evenings as we drifted down the River Orwell I was always filled with a sense of pride, not in myself, but in the little ship that carried me. When I wasn't sailing her I was thinking of how to improve her, my mind filling with ideas. Every time we sailed her she became more and more trusted, seemed to look after us better and better, as if she was reaching out from her dull life as a day sailor and begging for bigger and better adventures.

Having finished school and not really knowing what to do with myself I spent the majority of September 2019 afloat. Halfway through I took my first paid delivery job as a skipper, taking a thirty-eight-foot Hanse to the Solent from Ipswich, the first time I felt like I was taken seriously as a sailor in my own right. Above all this though, was the trip I had planned for the end of the month on *Muffin*.

The first night we spent planning an early departure down the coast. With rain coming down in sheets we drank our coffee, donned our oil skins and went up into the cockpit. Sliding hatch shut and

washboards in, we sailed off the anchor and with a double reefed main and a scrap of jib set made our way out to sea. Gybing off Bawdsey we lost the pin and spring from one end of the whisker pole, then an hour later we found ourselves in the middle of Orford overfalls, something we knew would happen, but had decided to deal with in order to make the most of a favourable tide. Despite the fact that the boat handled it well, this was an experience neither of us found enjoyable, and it was with a great sense of relief that I ferry glided onto the visitor's pontoon at Southwold two hours later.

"Where from today sir?"

"Ipswich"

"Boat name?"

"*Muffin*"

"That one?" He pointed, and I nodded, "You came here from Ipswich? Today? In that?"

"Yup."

"Have the night on me boys."

As the pints of Southwold bitter filled our empty stomachs the words of the harbour master started to sink in. What felt like a completely normal trip to us was obviously seen as near madness by others, who clearly thought we needed a bigger boat. It was that night as I lay awake listening to the rain on the deck above my bunk that I realised what I was going to do on my year off. Take a small boat on a big adventure.

As we went more sideways than forwards beating homeward, I realised that *Muffin* was not the boat for this plan. As it stood, we would sail north from Ipswich to Norway, then across to the Faroes, and down the Irish Sea to the 2020 celebrations at the Royal Cork Yacht Club. For a trip such as this I thought we would need a bigger boat, and with *Muffin* winterised I set my sights on long keeled folk boat derivatives in the twenty-five to twenty-six-foot range.

The Reality Check

Having spent October boat hunting, working double shifts at a pub, and researching the route, I was slowly beginning to think that perhaps I had bitten off more than I could chew. I sat down exhausted after a twelve-hour shift and looked at my parents, my font of all knowledge for all things sailing related. After a long discussion, and I think partly in exasperation, they offered the use of *Tinfish*, but on condition that I didn't leave UK waters. I instantly refused, heart set on Norway. However, as I looked away in frustration, my eyes found the sun-bleached copy of Ellen MacArthur's *Taking on The World*.

"It was enough for her, wasn't it." I said nodding towards the shelf.

"Yes, it was." I looked up at my globe-trotting parents, my biggest sailing heroes. "They say if you can sail round Britain you can sail anywhere."

A journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step, and so, in the space of fifteen minutes, the task had changed. And with a different task came a different boat, a small boat, a boat I could afford, a simple boat. There was only one boat I could think of.

"Okay," I said "But I don't want *Tinfish*. I don't want my parents to have funded this. I have to make it happen myself. I want it to happen on *Muffin*."

A visible look of relief came onto Mum's face and she nodded in agreement. Everything seemed to have fallen into place, and for the first time since Southwold I finally felt like this dream might just become a reality.

On the 23rd November 2019 I sat in the bar at Fox's marina and emptied my life's savings, signed on the dotted line, and took ownership, not just of my first boat, but of a lifelong dream. The cheap Co-Op prosecco came out and I liberally doused her bow before drinking my fill, sharing the moment with my two greatest friends. Simon and Issy had shared or followed most of my sailing adventures for the last two years. Simon, especially, had been with me in some very silly situations, and to him I will always be grateful, for I think without his calm cool headedness and can-do attitude I would have given up long before this stage.

Over the next four months there was what felt like a seemingly endless jobs list, many boxes to tick, and many existing ideas either proved too expensive or impractical. We spent most of our time problem solving; teaching ourselves from experience, the internet, and occasionally even books! We spent a successful first month doing basic interior work and tearing our hair out over what seemed like unnecessarily complicated wiring for the new lights, solar system, AIS receivers, and much more. What had previously seemed like such a big and airy electrical cabinet rapidly became cramped.

It was at this point that we had our first set back. Some simple 'cockpit locker yoga' ended up finding much more than just a lost nut in the bilge. Underneath years of sand and dirt I discovered a hole in the structural bulkhead separating the cabin from the aft of the boat. To make the issue worse the water had got underneath the interior moulding and rotted away the fibrous polyester filler that was in the gap. This problem brought up serious concerns about other areas of the boat and we soon found more rot issues. Bouncing back from this was hard, but with a few weeks away from the boat I had learned a new mindset and fresh determination to attack the issue. With the cockpit bulkhead re-sealed and glassed we opened up the other face allowing the water to drain before raking out the rot from the cracks, then leaving it to air before re-sealing.

With three days to our planned launch date there was a mad rush to pull all the pieces together. The rot problems seemed a thing of the past, but still there was the keel, or lack thereof. It was something that had been bugging me for a while. All we had were eight roughly shaped two-inch planks which we were planning to somehow laminate one above the other and then carve into shape. With various helpers coming at different points I spent seventy-two hours on the boat. We drilled and tapped the cast iron keel, bolted on the first 'shoe' of wood, and then laminated the others onto it using long screws and epoxy. Twenty kilos of lead was added to make the wood neutrally buoyant. With less than a day until launch we built a tent around the cradle and with fan heaters running at maximum we managed to get the rough wood faired, filled, epoxied and primed.

'From this evening I must give the British people a very simple instruction, you must stay at home.'

My hair matted with epoxy, face and hands rough and dirty, clothes covered in paint, and glue, exhausted beyond belief, I felt my world crashing down around me, plans ruined, my trip on hold. Suddenly I felt purposeless.

Not one to take life lying down, I had a haircut, a shower, a change of clothes, and within a week I had begun being productive again. Whilst focusing on the build I had forgotten some other very important aspects of my trip, and retrospectively I am thankful to have been forced to take some time to step back, and re-analyse the to-do list.

Finally, The Trip

By the end of quarantine I had applied for and received Marshall funding for essential safety equipment, which helped me secure insurance; made a sponsorship deal with Imray for free charts and books in exchange for pilotage information and pictures; and generally organised the ship's

papers. The RYA's announcement to a return to all forms of boating saw me back aboard in seconds, and once again rushing. In and on went: the new emergency equipment, a table, a spice rack, the windvane and electronic self-steering, and toe rails for the foredeck.

We launched on the 18th May, almost two months late, but it didn't matter, I was afloat, on my own boat, and with the nerves drowned by excitement I set off for a maiden voyage. The next month was spent shaking down. We were itching to go, but with Scotland and Wales taking time to come out of lockdown, and restrictions still in place, we didn't feel able to set off. Simon and Issy moved on board and we went for a final local cruise before returning to a mooring off Harkstead to wait out a weather window to head for Southampton. It was looking like quite a wait, but that evening returning from a meal ashore, I pulled out my phone to check the weather. There it was, a perfect window, two days of easterly wind, the very next day.

Fingers numb from the outboard I took a moment to savour the view, a powerful view. I remembered the Yachtmaster Instructor who had two years previously failed me on my Coastal Skipper, ridiculing me for trying to be too adventurous in such a poorly prepared boat. I wished he could see her now, prepared, crouched like a tiger ready to spring, ready for adventure.

As we raised the outboard, hoisted the sails and sheeted on for the beat out to Black Deep, Simon dozed off, Issy cooked, and I had one last survey of my patch, my home. I knew whatever was about to come would be tough and challenging, but I relished the prospect of exploring waters new, and my heart raced as the sun set on our first night at sea.

We made good time towards Dover. On a silky-smooth sea we motored through the straight, and then hoisted the monster kite, our biggest downwind sail. The sun was out and we started to truck along as the wind built astern. Getting the big sail down as we surfed at ten knots off Beachy Head proved interesting and I was glad Issy had reminded me to wear a life jacket and tether as I was soon reeling from a head-first encounter with a runaway spinnaker pole. Luckily, I was fine again by dinner, and as I watched the next sun rise astern over Selsey, and later as we swam in the crystal-clear Beaulieu River, I was proud of my little ship. Many still doubted me, and I knew more doubted her, but she didn't care and neither did I, we had made the first hurdle, and I was elated.

We spent some time in the Solent, met up with friends and waited out a westerly gale in Newtown Creek where we sacrificed a radar reflector, a mug, and four forks to Neptune. This was obviously not enough as we met nasty beating conditions for the sail to Studland Bay. Bored of the Solent we had decided to brave it, and once through the North Needles Channel we tacked off Barton-on-Sea and headed out into the rollers. Remembering how she used to slam I watched a particularly big one roar towards us. She climbed it, and at the top I thought "If she slams now, it's game over." She twisted, buried her shoulder, and threw out a rainbow of spray from under her bow, the water rolled back along the deck and doused us.

"How's she feel?"

"There's almost not enough weather helm!" came the reply, and I felt content knowing what a difference the new keel made, she was a different boat now, a better boat.

With more wind coming we let out a good amount of scope and settled down for a few days in Studland, once poking our noses round Old Harry and feeling rather bashful as we sailed back into the anchorage cold, wet and with two dead solar panels. Two days later, after being the first post-lockdown visitors to Poole Quay Marina, we beat back into the anchorage. As my well-oiled crew reached along the line of swim boys, luffed, and dropped the hook I felt smug knowing that this was the third time the man on the boat next door had watched us seamlessly perform this manoeuvre.

The next day, on the beat to Portland, I was once again stunned by the boat's performance. Being that much shorter than most boats out there, we saw that whereas they launched off the tops of the

swells and slammed down on the other side, we would gently slide over the crest and accelerate down the back of the wave. As Nick (our wind vane) did all the hard work, we smiled and waved at the crews on boats twice our length as we sauntered past them.

Portland harbour offered the opportunity to pop into the marina to collect a battery charger from Maddy Peitrzkiewicz who also stayed and helped to replace our lost radar reflector. With the panels out of action we had lost our only source of electrical generation and we were concerned about damaging the batteries. Thankfully, after seeing a picture of the corroded insides of the junction box on the panels, the company agreed that we should leave them at Portland to be collected so that they could be fixed. We pointed westward across Lyme Bay for yet more windward work without them.

What followed was a blissful week of cruising from Torquay to Plymouth via Dartmouth and Salcombe. We saw Dad in Dartmouth and he brought us a replacement tender. The old one was a bit small for the three of us and we found it too wet for daily use. Salcombe was as beautiful and expensive as expected, but we had a lovely two days there, seeing Issy's parents who had come down for her eighteenth birthday. It is always a pleasure to take other people out sailing on *Muffin*, and I must admit that I very much enjoy showing off her manoeuvrability and speed by trying, at all costs, to avoid using the engine, even when negotiating the busy Merlin Rocket fleet off Salcombe town.

Arrival in Plymouth was a significant point as our solar panels came back, recharging our batteries once again, and we could finally avoid marinas once more. With Plymouth being the last place where I had friends ashore, I tried to take advantage of an opportunity to replace or repair our boom, which looked like it was about to fail fairly dramatically owing to forty-five years of corrosion between it and its stainless-steel fittings. Having failed on my mission, we collected our first guest, Issy's friend Rose who was to be with us for an unknown period of time. We began to find ourselves enjoying the new crew dynamic, but envying the sardines for all the room they have in their tins.

Falmouth was another milestone, and the town anchorage brought with it the holy grail of shopping that is Trago Mills, and whilst we had the access to cheap supplies, we decided that we would try and tackle the incessant leaks which had been plaguing us every time we dipped the gunwale on a beat. All crew, even the guest were press ganged into scraping and sanding the rubbing rail so that we could attempt to force some more sealant into the hull-deck joint, where we suspected the leak to be originating from.

Leaving Falmouth, we made a quick stop to see a friend in the Helford River before heading on to Penzance. On this passage we had our first encounter with dolphins, who surfaced beneath us as we rounded The Lizard. We had another wonderful sail, but once again hard sheeted. However, the boat's motion was comfortable, and despite his squeaky blocks Nick saved us all a lot of effort by steering us safely up to the harbour entrance. Newlyn felt like the kind of fishing harbour I'd always dreamed of tying up in, and as we surfed on Penzance beach, I felt glad of the high breakwaters protecting our home.

July was almost over and I had an important decision to make. It was one that kept me awake at night. There had been talk before we left about possibly having to stop and turn around at the Scillies if we ran out of time to cruise around the whole country. I knew if we continued at the pace we had been we would never make it around. There was a weather window coming. Following a two day visit to the Scillies we could take a four-day window of southerly winds and make passage straight to Scotland. I told the others this is what we would do, but even as we started to make passage plans, I was considering not doing it. I wanted to take the window, however I did not have full faith in my skills as skipper or yet in the boat, and I knew the middle of the Irish Sea was not the place to find out if we were duffers or not.

We left in the dark with Nick steering, and I went back to sleep, so as to be sharper as we approached and crossed the TSS off Lands End. As the sun rose, I woke to the call of the whistle in the Runnel Stone cardinal. The waves were the biggest we'd seen all trip, but hard on the wind she was gliding across them, and as Wolf Rock dwindled behind us, we were escorted into our landfall by a pod of dolphins. We spent an afternoon and evening in The Cove, amazed by the Caribbean-like scenery. In the morning I woke up early and moved round to anchor outside Saint Mary's Pool. It felt nice to have the boat to myself again while the others slept, even if it was only for an hour. We just needed to go ashore and get a new gas bottle. I'd made up my mind we were going. I had promised too many people that I would sail round Britain and I couldn't let them down.

We spent that evening on a mooring in Old Grimsby harbour, making one final pass at the rub rails with the sealant gun, and going ashore to get some pilotage photos for Imray. I felt much more confident about the boat after the trip out from Newlyn, but nevertheless I made one last phone call to my parents, and recommended the others to do the same.

We were off, this was the decider, and yet I felt strangely calm. We had the wind behind us for the first time since the trip to Southampton, and it blew us effortlessly northward. This is what I posted about the trip when we arrived in Scotland, and I feel like it wraps it up fairly comprehensively.

'With four of us on board we set off late in the evening with a following wind behind us and a beautiful sunset.

Getting straight into the rigorous four hours on four hours off watch system Simon and Issy go to bed, leaving Pete and Rose to make a safe departure from the reefs and tidal races trying to keep us from leaving this Eden like paradise.

We sail for three days and three nights, nonstop, our lives revolving around the wind and weather, the clock, and who has the best of the two half length 'dog' watches.

We see phosphorescent micro plankton, lighting up our wake so bright you can almost read by it as our little adventure ship carves away the waves parting for us a safe channel, the dolphins come, bright green torpedoes illuminated by the same agitated micro critters. A truly indescribable sight, one of legend, one that has to be seen to be believed.

The night of day two brings squally conditions, and we have to reef and un-reef the sails to make the steering easier for our windvane Nick as he fights for control in the heavy surfing conditions. Still when he works we surf at ten plus knots, extra speed is good, it means less time at sea.

We have problems with our radio, and fittings pulling away from our old and dying boom, struggling to get a weather forecast we make landfall off the coast of Ireland following it for the day under engine, becalmed, noisy, irritating, still four on four off, a hot meal at 20:00 then on till midnight, the outboards drone never ceasing.

Rounding the infamous Mull of Kintyre we drop our anchor behind the island of Islay, Scotland at last, and a moment to relax, to catch up our beaten sleep schedules.'

What I realised on this leg of the trip was that we really did have a brilliant little ship. She had averaged 5 Knots over the ground, topped out at 11.4, and taken us 390 miles in three days, five hours, and forty-six minutes. She could take anything and survive it, provided we could take it with her. The crash of the backed mainsail and the shock of the broken boom fitting made me realise that I live and thrive off these kinds of adventures. Never this summer was I more in my element than lashing the kicking strap back onto the boom, and coaxing the thing into harbour, the quick thinking and problem solving required was something I was good at. I also realised just how special the sea is, and I found a new respect for it and its rhythms. By the time we got into Islay I didn't want to put the anchor down, I was in my own little world, 'a world of my own' and I didn't ever want to stop.

Rushing through the mass of squiggles on the chart marking the dangerous 'great race' we made it first to the Black Isles and then on to Oban, where Rose left us and we met the crew of SY *Cariad*. They were fascinated by what we were doing and, since we were having to go through the canal

instead of rounding Cape Wrath as we had originally intended, they went and purchased a box of muffins, which they took with them until our paths crossed again at Inverness. Hence, we can say that '*Muffin*' did in fact round Cape Wrath as well as transiting the Caledonian Canal! Oban was also where Simon went home for a few days, and on his return, he brought a kit Dad had put together to temporarily fix the boom with. What we did was to rivet a cut section of aluminium drain pipe around the weakened area of the boom, before re-fitting the original steel plate that the kicker attaches to. We spread the load of the mainsheet more evenly by supporting it on a webbing strap instead of the original stainless fitting.

The west coast of Scotland is easily one of the most beautiful places I have ever sailed, and I am very much looking forward to going back there one day. However, as always, we were rushing. Still sore from ascending the CMD Arête bagging Ben Nevis, we entered the Caledonian Canal and were soon being blown away by its natural scenery, even if it did mean having the outboard on all day. Loch Ness provided a chance to test the boom repairs, and also provided the most stunning anchorage of the entire trip. We lowered the anchor off the stern and tied the bow to a tree ashore, this setup allowed us to be in over ten metres of water and yet I could dive over the side and surface in waist deep water on a beautiful deserted beach.

After leaving the canal we really had to put the foot down, and with calm weather forecast we motored to Lossiemouth Marina, and the next day from there to Peterhead, where we stopped for an hour to buy more petrol before going on through the night to get to Dunbar. We had raced to get there before a nasty southerly blew through. Dunbar was the kind of harbour I had dreamed of when planning this trip, and with long springs set we went up and down the six-metre tidal range by the harbour wall, drying out at low tide. Nerve wracking, but also quite cool to return from a shore adventure and have the RCC burgee at eye level.

Leaving Dunbar the plan was to make a passage for Hull and wait out another window to get home. It was a blustery sail, and we were well reefed down as we passed the Farne Islands. As we rounded Flamborough Head and got phone signal, we realised that we would have enough of a window to make Lowestoft instead of Hull, considerably closer to home. Our route across The Wash was carefully planned to avoid all windfarms and gas fields, and as we crossed, I was blown away by a new beauty, not of nature as normal, but of these huge man-made leviathans, flashing like it was Christmas, far out of sight of land.

Sadly, what was not quite so well-lit was the windfarm which is being constructed on the Triton Koll sandbank. Focused on the busy shipping passing just north, I was not fussed by the sandbank on the chart, we could easily sail across it, and it was not until a towering black shape appeared about twenty metres off the port bow that I was alerted to an issue. Five minutes later I had worked out what these appallingly lit structures were, and after failing to find them on any chart, Simon finally found them when zoomed in to a tenth of a mile on the Navionics app. With all hands keeping a look out, I relieved Nick from the helm, headed up and aimed to get out of the farm.

A storm was coming so, after realising we could make it all the way home before it hit, we made it all the way to the Orwell the next day. And the day after that, Simon and Issy were gone.

The whole thing happened so suddenly I didn't know how to feel. It was over, no ceremony, no party, just me, alone, on an empty *Muffin*. Suddenly much more space, she felt like just boat again not a home. I didn't understand how they had returned to their normal land-based lives so easily, but they had their own new adventures to move onto. It took me another two weeks of living aboard before I finally felt able to move ashore. After a year of work it was all done and I felt lost, without a cause, down and neglected, like I had lost a family, because to me that is what they had become, Simon, Issy, *Muffin* and me.

By far the hardest thing to do, and the most tearful goodbye before university, was leaving the boat on a mooring. I fully winterised her, offloading everything into two dinghies and taking it ashore to Pin Mill, where I discovered that two dinghy loads constituted substantially more than one Renault Clio's load. The burgee came down for the first time since we had started and, as I left her for the final time, she too looked sad and neglected; no dodgers or wind vane, no sails or boom, no people, no vibrant life. She sat high on her marks, and once again blended in with the other daysailors. Only the gaunt frame of the stripped-down wind vane and solar panels indicated her new found heritage.

This trip taught me a lot of things: it taught me that the adventure itself is only ever half the story. There is a lot of planning and preparation to do beforehand. It taught me respect for nature, its power and beauty. It taught me a lot about myself, what my strengths are, and what my weaknesses are. It taught me about friendship, and how much it means, and finally it taught me to trust myself, and to be just mad enough to do what others say is impossible.

Word Count 5380

Start Point Ipswich 23rd June 2020

Beaulieu

Newtown Creek

Studland Bay

Poole Quay Boat Haven

Studland Bay

Portland Marina

Torquay

Dartmouth

Salcombe

Plymouth

Helford River

Falmouth

Scillies

- The Cove, then Saint Marys, Then Old Grimsby

Islay

Black Isles (56°14.01N 5°43.01W)

Oban

Fort William

Anchorage on Loch Ness (57°16.92N 4°27.48W)

Inverness

Lossiemouth

Peterhead

Dunbar

Voyage ends, Ipswich 24th August 2020

1580 Miles Sailed, 3 months and one day