

WOTAN'S LOG FOR DISTRIBUTION VIGO TO THE AZORES 2011

On Friday 22nd July we flew from Stansted to Santiago de Compostella, from where we caught a series of busses and taxis to the marina in Vigo. My crew for this leg was Peter Bentley and John Marett, both of whom have their own boat and are immensely experienced sailors, and John Theophilus, with whom I was at prep school. As soon as we could, we slipped and headed down to Bayonna, where we would provision and take our departure for Santa Maria in the Azores.

After a few early evening looseners, we headed into town to a tapas bar, which Peter and John had frequented in times past. As it turned out, it was connected with the restaurant that I had eaten in a fortnight earlier. It was not until late on Saturday afternoon that we had completed the provisioning. Strong winds were blowing out to sea, so it made sense to postpone our departure until the morning.

We slipped our lines at 1200 on Sunday morning and headed off for the Azores. The sky was blue, but the wind was still blowing F5-6. It was not long before we had taken in three reefs. Once we were out in the Atlantic the sea was quite rough. However, we were doing the best part of 8 knots so we were all very happy. Despite feeling a bit queasy, the crew all ate my chicken, lemon & basil, very bravely. The forecast was for the wind to moderate during the night, but by midnight there was precious little evidence of this.

It was not until early Monday morning that the wind began to moderate. We gingerly rolled out another measure of genoa as the wind by this time was hovering below 20 knots across the deck. The watermaker was running, so we could treat ourselves to showers. By noon, we were 645 miles from Santa Maria, averaging almost 7 knots. The weather remained overcast all day. We spent most of the day in our scratchers reading books, as sitting in the cockpit was uncomfortable! We decided that we would do "watches light" for the night. Rather than getting wet in the cockpit, we stood our watch below looking out, with Nicole the autopilot doing all the work. By noon on Tuesday we had 477 miles to go. Peter produced a wonderful pork casserole, which we washed down with copious amounts of wine.

During Wednesday morning the wind veered around to the north so that by 1400 we were able to pole out the genoa. We still had 15-20 knots across the deck and we were tanking along at 7 knots. At noon we had 305 miles to run. The weather had improved so we had lunch and several bottles of wine in the cockpit. The wind kept up through Thursday morning, so we were able to rattle along at 6-7 knots. Nicole had been doing all the work, so it was not surprising that she threw a minor hissy fit, but cleaning her teeth seemed to satisfy her. At 1300 the wind dropped and we shook out reefs 2 and 3. At 1900 we broke the 100 miles to run barrier. John Marett made us a huge Lancashire hot pot. He had kindly brought out a magnum of Torre Muga, a 2001 Rioja, to go with his dinner. I am ashamed to say that the bottle did not last until dinner! John Theo downed several glasses of this nectar, so

clearly any problems he had with nausea were now long past. After dinner we all went into the cockpit and sang more songs from the RCC Song Book.

At 0400 the wind began to die, so we started the motor and motored the remaining 40 miles to Vila do Porto on Santa Maria. At first light, Santa Maria could be seen as a smudge on the horizon. As we came closer, we could see the famous terraces on the east side of the island above Maia, which had been built with such effort to allow the cultivation of vines on the island's precipitous slopes. We made our landfall at Punta do Castello at 1050 and motored on into Vila do Porto, where we docked at 1210. We went to the friendly Club Navale for a beer, which morphed into a well deserved lunch. We hired a car at the airport, which had been built by the Americans in 1944 for the invasion of Europe. The airfield was enormous taking up much of the western end of the island. There was even a football stadium. Many of the Nissen huts were being used as houses. The old wooden control tower was still standing but it had been replaced with a new concrete control tower, from which trans-Atlantic airspace is controlled.

We spent Saturday exploring the island of Santa Maria. Our first stop was at Anjos, on the north coast, where the first settlers had landed and built a charming little chapel, part of which still remains. It was here that Christopher Columbus made his landfall on the way back from the New World. He sent half his crew ashore, who were promptly captured and clapped in prison! You have to remember that the Azores were Portuguese and that Spain had been at loggerheads, if not at war, with Portugal for many a long year. Christopher Columbus had been sent out by the King of Spain, so as far as the Azoreans were concerned, he could have been just another pirate or raider, up to no good. He had to sail over to Sao Miguel to obtain dispensation for his crew to be released, before he could recover them and head back to Bayonna. We wound our way east across the island to Santa Barbara and then down a very steep and rough road to São Lourenço, which lies in a small bay with an island just off its southern end. We climbed back up on a much better road to Santo Espírito, where there is a beautiful church of Our Lady of the Purification. This took us to our final stop at Maia a small fishing village, come holiday resort, in the south-eastern corner of the island, overlooked by the lighthouse on Punta do Castello, where we had made our landfall. Here we had lunch before racing back to Porto to return the car.

We cast off from Porto, in the early evening, singing sea shanties, much to the amusement of the locals and headed off to Angra on Terceira. The wind was almost dead on our nose, so we resigned ourselves to motoring all the way. We docked in the marina at Angra do Heroísmo at 2020 the next day.

We spent Monday morning making repairs to Wotan. Everyone did their bit, while I simply looked on! Angra is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is full of the most beautiful painted buildings, with details such as windows and doors picked out in black basalt. We tried and failed to hire a car in Angra, but we were offered a car up at the airport at Lajes, near Praia da Vitória. The answer was simple, sail up to Praia and pick up the car there. We wandered up to the lovely public garden, with its bandstand and memorial to Alameda Garrett, which Bruce and Alison Garrett had so liked when they visited it with

me in 2007. Angra became very rich because it was where the Portuguese treasure and trading ships passed through on the way to and from the New World and the East Indies.

After refuelling, we slipped from the marina at 1135 on Tuesday morning and headed east down the coast towards Praia da Vitória. We took the opportunity to sail through the Ilhéus das Cabras channel, which was a caldera. The passage, though not dangerous in fair weather, is very spectacular indeed. I had been through it before in 2007 and I could not resist doing it again! This is a real photo opportunity so everyone's cameras and videos were out. There was a festival at Praia and the marina was full, so we anchored off. Ashore there were two enormous marquees erected by the marina in which there were restaurants, offering food and wines from various regions of Spain and Portugal. It was all really well organised.

We set off next morning to explore Terciera; Terciera, because it was the third Azorean island to be discovered. We drove along the north coast to Biscoitos, where we visited a wine museum. We then cut across to the Lagoa das Patas, which is a charming little lake with picnic tables in a small pinewood. It was formed in yet another caldera. The hydrangeas on roads up on the top of the island were still in full bloom, retaining their blue colouring. Those at lower levels have already turned white in the heat. We went down to São Mateus la Calheta, a busy fishing village, where we had lunch in restaurant overlooking the port. I had been to this restaurant in 2007, when it was heaving. It was still just as busy despite it being mid-week. The port infrastructure had been improved significantly since 2007, with a large Travelift and a 20 tonne crane. We drove on down to Angra and up Monte Brazil, past the barracks, in which there had been a garrison for many centuries. At the top of Monte Brazil was a battery of Bofors anti-aircraft guns that had been installed during WWII. Quite what they were expected to shoot down, history does not relate! We headed back to the Grutas de Natal, to go down the lava tubes. The tubes were well lit, with helpful notices explaining in Portuguese and English the formations on display. We were very glad of our hard hats as the ceiling was often quite low.

I announced to the crew that the best way to go to Ponta Delgada on São Miguel would be to sail over night. Asked by John Theo how far it was, I replied about 100 miles. Oh, he said that is nothing! He was soon to be promoted Able Seaman on the strength of this can-do attitude! At 1840 we weighed anchor and set course for Ponta Delgada in a gentle SW4, which gave us a beam reach all the way.

Midnight saw us 50 miles off the western end of São Miguel. We docked at Ponta Delgada to clear the usual slew of bureaucracy at 0945. John Theo cooked us a slap up breakfast after which we retired to bed. I was somewhat disappointed not to have met any OCC or RCC yachts in the Azores. As usual, there were lots of French yachts around, but very few British yachts. The French seem to have taken to ocean cruising with more aplomb than most other nations.

We eventually picked up a hire car at noon the next morning and set off for tour of the island. Unfortunately the cloud was low that the views of Lagoas Azul and Verde were obscured, It was John Theo's 65th birthday, which we celebrated in the cockpit, with some bubbles that he had wisely purchased in Bayonna.

Peter and the two Johns flew back to Gatwick on Saturday afternoon, thus ending a most enjoyable passage and cruise.

ACFF
15th September 2011