

LOG OF WOTAN AZORES TO ITCHENOR 2011

My new crew, Digger Harris, who had sailed back from the Azores with me in 2007 and earlier this year to Brittany, James Gordon, who had sailed back from Oban with me last year and Michel Schammel another Astrophysics PhD student at Cambridge, did not arrive until the early hours of Sunday morning, as their flight had been delayed.

We set off to explore Sao Miguel. This time the view from La Vista del Rei was not obscured by cloud. The Lagoas Azul and Verde looked splendid. We revisited Mostieros, with its natural sea bathing pools and off-lying islands and Ribiera Grande, the second largest town on the island, before going on to Furnas. We visited the Terra Nostra botanical gardens and the fumaroles, before returning to Wotan.

We sailed in mid afternoon on Monday to Angra. The wind was light from the south giving us a broad reach up to Terciera. While the sea was relatively calm, there was quite a swell. We arrived at the Ilheus das Cabras Channel soon after sunrise. We ran through the channel with the wind behind us and the motor turning over gently. It was difficult to see the different colours of the rock formations in the dawn light, but nevertheless it was a spectacular sight. We docked in Angra at 0840. The crew explored the city and I think they rather fell in love with it!. They discovered that Angra meant a cove, or creek in Portuguese.

We set off at midday on Wednesday 10th August to sail to Velas on Sao Jorge. The weather was lovely, if a bit hot. We had a good sail until we entered the channel between Pico and Sao Jorge, when the wind died. We docked in the smart new marina and went ashore to the Club Navale, which I had visited in 2007 and rather liked. The next morning we went for a walk around Velas, visiting the picturesque library and theatre complex, overlooking Pico, and the main church, with a statue of a rather friendly dragon and a mosaic of St George fighting the dragon outside. We sailed to Horta to find The Festival of the Sea in full swing.

In the morning, Digger and the lads took the ferry over to Pico to visit the lava tubes, while I busied myself with some minor jobs. When they came back the lads set about painting a picture of Wotan on the harbour wall in the time-honoured fashion. There must be a thousand such paintings adorning the harbour. We spent Saturday morning putting the finishing touches to our provision list, then, while Digger and I headed off to the hypermarket, James and Michel set about the ticklish task of painting the lettering. By the time Digger and I returned, the painting was complete and very handsome it was too! We decided that a final beer at Café Sport was called for to celebrate the completion of the picture.

While we were queuing for dinner, the full moon came up over Pico and tracked up its slope. It was a magical sight. After dinner, we wandered into a nearby marquee in which various organisations were exhibiting. Suddenly

Digger was embraced by an Italian lady. (This does not happen to me!) It turned out to be Valeria, who was Digger's grandson's godmother. She and her husband were in the Azores for a walking holiday, what a coincidence!

On Sunday morning, after a few last minute preparations we moved to the fuel berth and by midday we were on our way. We had been warned by Networks, our weather router, that there would be little or no wind and so it proved. We made painfully slow progress in sweltering heat, the sails flapping all the while. By midnight we were a mere 45 miles nearer Falmouth. With the distance between Horta and Falmouth being 1220 miles, we had not made much of a dent in the voyage! At 0145 the wind began to fill in from the South, things were improving. After breakfast we hoisted the spinnaker. Initially we hand-steered, but with Nicole our speed improved considerably. It was a beautiful day and we were sweltering in the cockpit. We kept the spinnaker up all night. By midnight we had made 90 miles towards our destination. We had in fact covered a lot more miles as we were heading well to the north of our rhumbline as we expected northerly winds on the morrow.

At 0600 on Tuesday morning, a squall came through, heralding a wind shift. James pressed the alarm to call us all on deck. We had the spinnaker doused and back in its sock in minutes. The scene changed from idyllic Azorean weather to Atlantic weather in a few hours. We had 30 knots across the deck and three reefs in the main, making a course just shy of our rhumbline. The day and night were spent going hard to windward and getting very wet! While I was on watch, I was told that the EPIRB had begun to flash. I immediately sent an email to Falmouth CG to explain that we were not in distress and that the alert was caused by water coming down the companionway. While I was doing this, the Sat C alarm went off, the usual indication that an urgent or distress message has come through. I found a message from Falmouth CG asking if I was in distress as an alert had been received. Within minutes of my email being sent, I received an acknowledgement from Falmouth CG and thanks for my prompt reply. We were all very impressed by the speed of Falmouth CG's response. They had also called home and spoken to Henri to tell her of the distress alert. They called back five minutes later to say that all was well. We covered the EPIRB with a plastic bag!

The strong NNE winds, which were keeping us well heeled over and heavily reefed down, continued all Wednesday. We all reckoned that we could do with a break. James decided that to keep dry he needed to build a wigwam over the bottom of his bunk. Try as I will, it seems to be impossible to stop water coming down a Swan 411 mast. Networks, had advised us to head north to reach the northern side of the Azores high, which would give us south westerly winds. Perfect, just what we wanted. We spent two hours trying to go north but really we just went west, so we gave that idea up!

During Thursday morning, the wind began to moderate and the sun came out. By noon we were 787 miles from Falmouth keeping up our 5 knot batting average. Wotan was sailing herself with the wheel locked. We saw a whale about a cable away on the surface, which blew several times. James managed to take a photo of it, though I suspect that it may need a certain amount of Photoshop enhancement! We had a wonderful day's sailing,

rounded off by bubbles in the cockpit. Around midnight the wind died completely, so I decided to take down the main and roll up most of the genoa, leaving a pocket-handkerchief sheeted hard in on both sides to act as a damper for our rolling. We ended up drifting south at 0.5 knots, which sadly was taking us away from these illusive south-westerly winds.

At 0400 on Friday, a breeze set in from the north that allowed us to start sailing again. Soon after this Nicole stopped working. I found that the nuts on the screws holding the hydraulic ram had worked loose and there was a hydraulic fluid leak. This was poor maintenance on my behalf, for which there was no excuse. We tried to bleed the system using the instructions we carried, but to no avail. We would have to hand-steer from now on, but with a crew of four this was not a real problem. I had done it before between the Virgin Islands and New York back in 2006. We decided that the SW wind was too good to miss, so we set the spinnaker and sped homewards. It was a delightful day's sailing with lunch in the cockpit. After dinner, I noticed that the wind was increasing and James pointed out that the barometer had fallen 4mb during the past three hours. I decided that the time had come to get the spinnaker in for the night. We made something of a trousers of lowering it, as the clew was allowed to escape almost causing us to broach. In the end the spinnaker was doused and the genoa poled out for the night. The weather soon closed in and it began to rain buckets. We all had a fairly unpleasant night hand-steering for two hours at a time. By midnight we were 642 miles from Falmouth, not quite half way, but nearly!

During the night, the clouds gradually lifted and we caught a glimpse of the moon, brightening up an otherwise pitch black night. At 0600 the wind dropped and veered into the north. From then on things improved and we were soon sailing close-hauled under blue skies on course for Falmouth. At noon we were 582 miles from Plymouth. We lunched on the two loaves of bread that James had baked the day before washed down by a bottle of red wine, at Digger's insistence. I should point out that Digger really only wakes up for food, drink, his watches and to amuse us all!

During Sunday the wind veered, until by nightfall we were barely able to sail north of east. We tried to repair the compass light, which had been working intermittently, but we only succeeded in stopping it working altogether! Fortunately we had a fluxgate compass by which we were able to steer. It was a rather gastronomic day. James produced a wonderful pasta salad for lunch with tuna and all manner of goodies. Digger prepared corned beef hash in industrial quantities for dinner, all of which vanished in a flash. It was "champagne sailing" with blue skies, calm seas and a gentle F3!

We had been told by Networks that there would be westerly winds north of 47°N. At 0930 on Monday 22nd August, we gave up the unequal struggle to make northing under sail and motored north until 1800, when we were north of the magic 47°N. There was still just a miserly NNE2! Come midnight we had only reduced the distance to go by 11 miles in the previous 6 hours! Early on Tuesday morning the unfortunate Michel was on watch with the sails flogging and going nowhere. For the second time on this voyage we dropped

the sails and retired to bed! At 1000 we started the engine in desperation. At noon we had 298 miles to go to Falmouth, which I felt that called for a celebration, so we downed a bottle of Cava and three more bottles of wine! After which we set the spinnaker and began to reel off some miles thanks to a light WSW breeze. In retrospect, perhaps we should have set about these activities in the reverse order! We dropped the spinnaker at 2000, but continued with the genoa poled out for the rest of the night.

Michel, who had already missed an important meeting at Cambridge, was very keen to reach Cambridge by Friday morning, as he had friends coming to stay. We reckoned that with a slice of luck we should be able to make Falmouth by 1900 on Thursday, in time for him to catch the sleeper from Truro to London. In the early morning we started the engine as our speed had dropped off to 3 knots. We could not go on motoring as our supplies of fuel were limited. We had a burst of sailing for a couple of hours in the mid-morning, but by lunchtime we were back to motoring again. At noon we had 153 miles to go to Falmouth, the race was on! The wind filled in during the afternoon and towards evening it began to increase. We took in three reefs and rolled up more genoa. We were flying. It was hard work on the wheel. At the end of our two-hour watch we all felt pretty tired.

We gybed at 0400 on Thursday on to a course that took us to the Lizard. We sighted land at about midday, which was rather exciting after 11 days at sea. Michel baked us a loaf of bread in celebration. We rounded the Lizard at 1618 and docked in Falmouth at 1905. We had averaged a miserable 4.5 knots. Michel organised a taxi to take him to Truro, where he caught the sleeper. For someone who had never sailed a cruising boat before or, indeed, ever sailed offshore, Michel did tremendously well.

We had planned to meet up with Henri in Falmouth. Just as we were heading into the Chain Locker for dinner, she called to say that she was already there. Henri joined us the next morning to sail to Salcombe. As it turned out we motored all the way, while Henri slept. We picked up a visitors buoy at 2100 and jumped into the water taxi to go ashore to the famous Ferry Inn. During the night, I woke up, looked at my watch and shouted out, "James you are due to relieve Digger on his watch and you are 20 minutes late!" I was soon reminded that we were in Salcombe! I suffered a lot of ribbing in the morning! Henri took the water taxi ashore and headed off back to Falmouth, while we set off for Studland Bay. The wind was in the west. We set the main with two reefs and the genoa poled out to windward and set course for Portland Bill. The tide was against us so we made slow progress for the rest of the morning and early afternoon until the tide turned in our favour at 1630. We rounded Portland Bill at about 1930 and anchored in Studland Bay at 2300.

Next morning, despite a forecast of W7, we motored almost all the way to the Needles Channel, where we set the genoa and then the main off Keyhaven. We made good speed down the Solent, with the wind behind us. We passed through the forts at 0935 and entered Chichester harbour an hour later. There was a wonderful reception committee of all the family waiting for us in Gonzo, our RIB! There was much waving and photographing

as we came in. We docked on the Club jetty for the obligatory photograph of the crew standing under the flags of the countries visited on the cruise.

Thus ended a most enjoyable three-week cruise of the Azores and passage back to Itchenor. It all took a bit longer than expected, but as James kindly said, "he could not imagine a better bunch of blokes to be becalmed with!"

ACF Fawcett
16th September 2011