

ATLANTIC CROSSING ~ IT COULD HAVE BEEN EASIER

Martin Grube

Astrid and I have been Associate Members of the OCC since 2020, the year we quit work to start cruising without having to go home to work again. But 2020 was also the year the pandemic started. Because of this and for family reasons we had to change our cruising plans again and again, but in the end we managed to achieve some of them and in January 2023 it was time to cross the Atlantic to sail via the Caribbean, the USA and Canada into the Great Lakes.

Our yacht *Pincoya* is a Jutlandic 37 DS, an unknown Danish brand, built in 1995. We bought her in 2010 and since then have not only prepared her for long-distance cruising but have also sailed almost 25,000 miles with her. Since 2020 we have been thinking about what passage would be accepted as an OCC qualifying voyage. For the last two years we couldn't find a suitable, and in particular a long enough, passage that also fitted our plans. But now it was time for the Atlantic crossing.

We celebrated Christmas and New Year on El Hierro in the Canaries, leaving for the Cape Verde islands on 2nd January. It was a quick and easy passage without any problems. At times it was a bit rough, but nothing we could not deal with. After a couple of quite windy days in the anchorage at Mindelo we decided to start on 14th January for Martinique. The first days were pretty normal, nothing special – two days with a bit more wind up to 25 knots, one day with light winds and the rest somewhere in between. But on the morning of the seventh day we faced the nightmare of every sailor.

Pincoya, our Jutlandic 37 DS





Santo Antão, the westernmost island of Cape Verde

When we are sailing we check everything all the time. If we need to go to the bow we automatically check the shrouds, the foresails and all the other things in that area, and every morning and evening we check the rigging with the binoculars. On the morning of the seventh day we saw that the second shroud on the port side, the intermediate one, had started to strand. When something happens that definitely should not happen you feel like your heart has stopped beating ... but it was real.

The day had started with a good sailing wind of 15–18 knots, the Parasailor was up and we were making about 6.5 knots in a 2.5–3.5m swell ... and now this. We had 765 miles behind us with 1320 miles to go – not really a good place to face such a problem. First we had to drop the Parasailor. We have a routine to do this, with Astrid in the cockpit to handle the sheets while I pull down the snuffer and try to tame the sail until we can get it down through the forward hatch. So far so good. But we were nervous.

While we were dropping the Parasailor the starboard sheets fell overboard and vanished under the hull. The nightmare was going on while the motor was running. I shouted from the bow and Astrid stopped the motor immediately and put it into reverse. (As long as *Pincoya* is moving forward the propeller does not like to fold, hence the reverse.) Luckily we managed to get the sheets back on board without getting

them into the propeller. After the Parasailor was below and all the sheets on deck again we restarted the motor and took a deep breath.



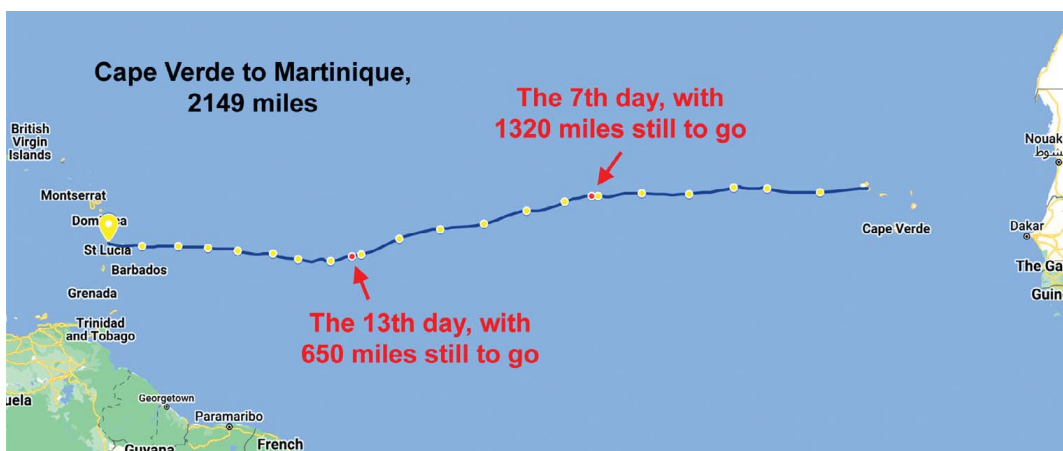
The intermediate shroud has started to strand

any mistakes. Our situation was bad enough without more mistakes from us, otherwise the situation would escalate and we would end up as a case of maritime distress.

Continuing to the Caribbean was the only thing we could do. We only had fuel for about 400 miles, the Cape Verdes were already 765 miles behind us, and sailing upwind with a broken shroud is impossible. We still had more than 1300 miles to go to the Caribbean, but it would be downwind.

First we had to stabilise the rig. Luckily we have running backstays to support our cutter rig, but they are attached to the mast approximately 1m above where the intermediate shrouds are attached. The shrouds have ball terminals and come directly out of the root of the top spreader. That was fortunate as it meant we could attach our temporary support around the spreaders. At first I wanted to tie a loop around the mast above the spreaders, but this would have blocked the mast track. Then Astrid had the idea of tying the running backstay around the spreader root with a soft shackle* and leading it across in front of the mast to the other side. That kept the mast track free so we could set the main without any limitation. Because the shackle would have to last a long time we pulled a piece of hose over it.

* Similar to the final soft shackle variation demonstrated on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXG17Q__6aY



Ready to climb the mast

Now everything was ready. The only remaining task was to climb the mast to install our temporary support, but when I looked up the mast I felt anything but well. *Pincoya* was rolling heavily in the waves and the top of the mast was swinging 4–5m from side to side. With me as a top weight it would not decrease. I was not sure if I would make it, but there was no other choice but to try. If we did not manage to support the mast we would not have the smallest chance of reaching Martinique.

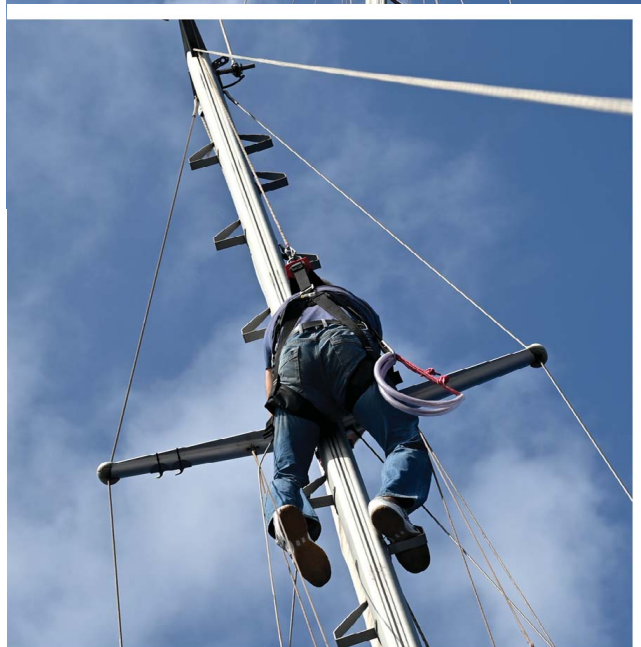
The good thing was that we already had a routine for climbing the mast, with Astrid in the cockpit to secure me while I climbed the mast steps. But we had never done it offshore and agreed afterwards that we don't want to do it offshore again. We talked about everything we had to do in detail – what I had to do at the top of the mast and what she had to do in the cockpit. It was extremely important that nothing was left unclear, as the one down on deck is the life insurance for the one who has to climb.

Luckily we have mast steps, as without them it would have been impossible. Our mast steps are of the closed triangle type, which is more than important because you can grab them to have an immediate and secure hold with your hands and your foot cannot slip away once it is in the triangle. With steps that you have to unfold from the mast before you can hold onto them it would have been impossible, as the absolute worst thing would be to lose your grip, which would probably end with serious injury or death.

Because we have mast steps and we mistrust normal bosun's chairs we have a full safety harness to secure the climber. It is safe and even comfortable to sit in, and is unconscious-proof. Normally we attach the halyard as secure rope at the back of the harness and did this now. If I climb the mast in harbour I often secure myself with a lifeline when I have reached the right position on the mast, but this is a bad idea offshore. Offshore the boat is rolling and if I lost hold and hit the mast so that I was badly injured or even unconscious Astrid would have no chance of lowering me down to the deck.

There is another reason. If I lost hold I would swing around completely free on a long pendulum, fixed by the halyard to the masthead. It would be quite possible to get swung in front of the mast, and I would certainly crash into the rigging. To avoid this at least





Made it...

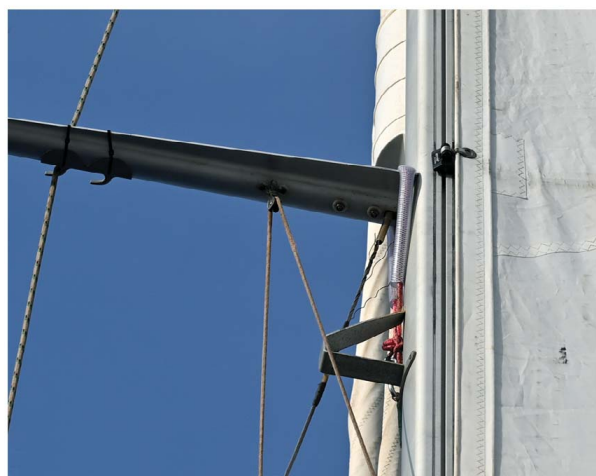
*...but swaying from one side
to the other...*



a bit, we fixed a second rope to the back of my harness. We led this via the middle cleat on *Pincoya's* windward side, which is a good deal aft of the mast, to the second winch in the cockpit. Normally Astrid only has to hold this rope loosely, but if I get in trouble and lose my grip she can immediately



*In the end we
got our running
backstays fixed
correctly*



limit the radius in which I start to swing. It is not perfect, but what is perfect in such a situation? And if I am injured or unconscious she can pull me away from the rig and lower me down to the deck. To do this we had to tie away the lazy jacks, but we only had this idea for the second climb, not for the first.

With all this in mind we started our first offshore mast-climb. To be honest, I was afraid and Astrid was too. Once on the boom I waited until the rolling calmed down a bit, then two or three steps and *Pincoya* started to roll again. I am not weak and I have done some sport in my life, but it was hard not to lose my grip even there. Step by step I



So far so good...

climbed the mast and if the rolling started again I clung to the mast like a little monkey. In those moments Astrid winched me up a bit until the halyard was really tight, then I could sit in the harness and the only thing I had to do was not to lose hold. We repeated this again and again, using every quiet moment to get me higher up.

When I reached the top spreader I looked down, a big mistake. I saw myself far above and far outside *Pincoya* – I closed my eyes and was sure I would not survive. It was hard to calm down and start attaching our temporary mast support. It took quite a long time because I had only a couple of seconds before I had to cling to the mast like a monkey again. It is not easy to concentrate in a situation like that – the stress prevents your head from working properly. Finally it was done. Astrid looked up the mast from the deck and everything seemed to be okay, so little by little I climbed down. The only thought in my mind was: ‘It’s done, don’t make any mistakes now’. When I was back in Astrid’s arms I could not stop myself from crying. I have not often been afraid in my life, but this was simply too much.

As we tried to tighten our construction we noticed that I had twisted the running backstays at the lower spreaders, so I had to climb up that far again. As I wrote earlier, if you are clinging to the mast and being tossed around badly your head does not work properly. Then we realised that when I had attached the running backstays around the root of the top spreaders I had fixed them outside and not inside the shroud terminals, so the pressure was now on the terminals. So I had to climb up a third time. Normally we drink no alcohol while we are sailing, but afterwards Astrid gave me a glass of red wine. The main task was done and the only thing left was to reach Martinique – 1320 miles to go!

Which sail would be the best not to overload the weakened mast? We decided to use the main, as on a downwind course it is stable and calm and most of the load is on the backstay. It was absolutely clear to us that only we could help ourselves. For the worst case scenario, if the mast came down, we kept the angle grinder ready to cut all the shrouds and stays, and in order not to lose the spinnaker pole together with the mast we stowed it on deck.

So far so good, we were sailing again, but we were more than strained and very nervous. Our temporary support did a good job, however, and the situation did not get worse overnight. We started to check all the other shrouds by taking photos of them. This is much easier than with binoculars and has two other advantages – you can zoom in to see everything in detail and you can compare new pictures with older ones.



*From time to time the weather
was challenging for our
weakened rig*



Completely broken



Overall we made good progress towards Martinique, sometimes a bit too good because the wind increased from time to time. We reduced sail, but could not completely avoid stressing our weakened rig. But the wind was definitely not the worst thing – the waves and the swell were much more dangerous. When the wind



The Parasailor at work

*Anti-chafe covering on
the temporary replacement*

dropped the swell stayed with us. The sails flapped and with every stroke the mast shook precariously. Even when there was enough wind to prevent the sails from flapping, the waves stressed the rig all the time. We tried to find the calmest possible course through the waves, but it was difficult and we did not always succeed. We tried everything and even used the Parasailor again, because it is the calmest sail on a downwind course.

On the 13th day the shroud broke completely and came down. We had already made another 650 miles towards Martinique but there were still 650 miles to go. With the shroud broken completely, the mast showed a clear bend to starboard and started to work in the

waves even more than before. Because of this the port side running backstay began to chafe against one of the mast steps, so I climbed up again to put a piece of hose over it.

Apart from some challenging squalls the weather calmed down. We were lucky with a couple of days with light winds, but then it turned into the north and our course was taking us more to Venezuela than to Martinique. We had to stay patient, however, as it was impossible to sail full-and-by or even on the wind. For days our course had had nothing to do with a great circle so our distance got longer and longer. In the end we sailed about 75 miles more than the great circle route.

When the wind became too light for sailing we started to motor, but we had to be careful as our diesel reserve was not sufficient to simply motor all the way. We had to find a compromise between light-wind sailing, drifting and motoring as we neared Martinique. The first thing we saw as we approached was Mount Gimie on St Lucia. We had made it!

We just had to hope that the squalls would miss us





Despite all our problems, there were also wonderful moments

A last challenge awaited us. A huge front of squalls with heavy rain hit us and gusts up to 30 knots made us doubt whether everything would turn out well. We reduced the sails to a small shred and made the passage between St Lucia and Martinique. After 20 days 20 hours and 40 minutes we dropped anchor off Sainte-Anne in southern Martinique, having sailed 1384 miles with the broken shroud. We obviously made no major mistakes, but this is only one side of the coin. On the other side is written: 'You were extremely lucky. Don't forget!'

So we did most of our OCC qualifying passage with a broken shroud, a very special 'offshore qualification'. It was an experience we will not forget but really do not want to repeat!

Ready for landfall in Martinique

