

# WHAT I AM TALKING ABOUT when I talk about crossing the Atlantic?

**Mike Keizer**

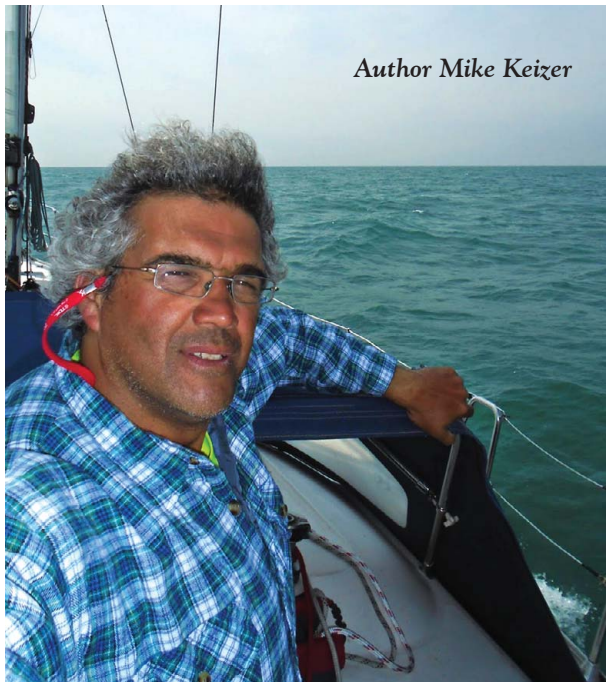
*(As soon as a new member is accepted, Club Secretary Rachelle Turk sends them a 'welcome e-mail' full of practical information about the Club, the OCC website etc. It also mentions the Qualifier's Mug, suggesting they might like to submit an article to enable them to be entered for it. Mike joined in 2022 so it's taken him a little while to get around to this but cruisers have a reputation for being unhurried...)*

When Rachelle asked me to write something about crossing the Atlantic, my shot-from-the-hip reaction was – boring! Mostly very boring. I absolutely didn't know what I should write about. I would love to cross the Atlantic again, but differently with the knowledge and experience I gained.

It took me a while to distance myself from this adventure and to be able to say something meaningful, I hope, about it. I was not aware of what an Atlantic crossing would mean to other people or to myself. I never gave it any thought because I was too occupied with reaching my goal. And I am still working on it because I see crossing the Atlantic as a stepping stone to circumnavigating. It took the people surrounding me in 'normal life' time to react to it as well, as I never advertised, announced or talked about it much.

In the apartment building where I live in Switzerland, some of the kids that rode with me in the elevator looked at me open-mouthed and were unusually silent until I reached my floor and we said our goodbyes. At first I wondered what was wrong with these kids but I suppose that most people are talking about me behind my back instead of talking to me. Young people apparently do the same in school. I am still getting reactions from people more than three years on, though, which I find surprising. The most surprising reaction was from my mother. She told me she was proud of me – something she never ever told me before and never ever did after. Later on I found out that she told her doctor, and it was only after he replied that it was kind of exceptional that I guess she started to give it some thought.

I never labelled this passage as exceptional, it was just something I had wanted to do from a very young age. I never expressed my inclination publicly or advertised it in a newspaper. I treated it, as I did all my other 'strange' ideas, as something that would not be taken very seriously ... some wacky idea from a not-so-straight-thinking idiot. I've had the luck to implement



some of my 'strange' ideas outside of sailing too, but none of them caused attention like crossing the Atlantic did. I don't see myself as a boat or sailing person but more like someone who likes a degree of adventure and to explore new things, plus I am curious about what explorers like Columbus or Magellan experienced on their voyages.

Since I have been subjected to most questions more than just once, I guess I am prepared and not taken by surprise anymore and now feel able to say or write something sensible about it.

It took me a very long time after Rachelle asked me, and I only

got inspired and started writing after I read Haruki Murakami's book *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*. So yes, I confess to having stolen, or rather adapted, the title. Haruki Murakami did the same because he modified it from the title of a book by Raymond Carver, *What we talk about when we talk about love*. That is where all literary aspirations from my side end – the title. Although not a marathon runner like Mr Murakami, I did run or jog, whatever you want to call it, almost everything up to a half marathon and cycled up to 250km a day (with camping gear), so I kind of identify with what Mr Murakami is writing about and I admire his disciplined training and writing.

### **So, what am I talking about when I talk about sailing?**

First I should talk about sailing. What does it mean to me? What does it do to me? These are not subjects I talk about in a pub or clubhouse over a pint of beer, or in my case usually a glass of Diet Cola.

When I imagine a sailing craft I think of a J Class yacht powering through the water propelled by a cloud of white sails, probably the classic romantic image of most sailing-inclined folk. But when I think of sailing, I remember having the most fun when I was younger, sailing on a lake in summer in a Polyvalk, a popular Dutch open rental boat, sleeping under a deck-tent during the night. Playing with the wind. Just holding helm and sheets. Watching the ripples made by the wind on the water and observing the birds and the clouds. Listening to the water gurgling when passing around and under the hull. Seeing the flow detach itself from the hull. Feeling the boat heel over when a wind gust graced me with a gentle push, propelling the boat forward like a giant hand. Watching dragonflies play in and over the reeds. Listening to the birds singing. Watching the ducks, geese and swans herding their offspring.

My parents weren't very interested in sailing so I got my introduction and part of my instruction from an uncle and a cousin of my father. They had yachts with cabins. I laid my hands on a comic written and drawn by Gerard van Straaten about a certain Eilco Kasemier who returned from a circumnavigation in 1978. Later on I read a book by Herman Jansen who circumnavigated in a fibreglass boat. Both were eye-openers which started me thinking and dreaming as a youngster. In 2012 I was going through my list of things to do and there it was again: sailing around the world.

I bought my first boat in 2014 from a Dutch couple who had moved to the Lofoten islands. That's where the boat was and I had a huge chance to learn and gain experience while sailing her back to the Netherlands. I sold her in March the following year as I wanted something designed less for close-hauled sailing and more for the trade winds, with a useful galley, a shower, toilet, plenty of ventilation for the tropics and a cabin in which I could stand upright. My budget did not allow for a fancy 40+ footer so I had to cram everything that I thought might be useful inside a Bavaria 34 and go it alone. What Max did have was two 150 litre water tanks, which made it very desirable to me, and was much wider aft which made it less prone to rolling and more suited for trade wind sailing. I also found an aft cockpit better for solo sailing and the easily-accessible swim platform is ideal.

*Max in St Peter Port*



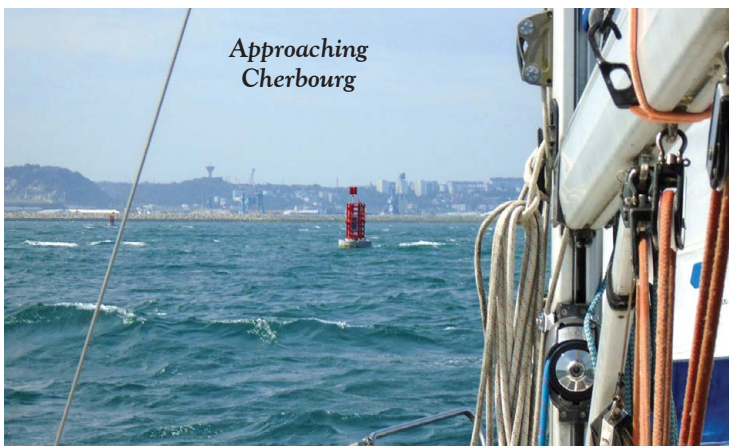


### *Mike's folding bike – very handy for shopping*

I want to make clear that I am not a tourist. I didn't start my trip with an urge to see everything remotely interesting to me or to the general public, or all ports and anchorages between the North Sea and the Panama Canal. In the end I had ten stops – Stellendam (Netherlands), Cherbourg (France), St Peter Port (Guernsey), A Coruña

(Spain), Póvoa de Varzim, Figueira da Foz and Vilamoura (Portugal), Arrecife (Lanzarote, Canary Islands), Rodney Bay (St Lucia) and Curaçao. In any case, I didn't have the time to be a tourist. I am in my 50s so not retired, was not on unpaid leave and I couldn't take a sabbatical. I did it because I wanted to cross the Atlantic and I wanted to do it now. I have witnessed too many hard-working men found half-paralysed or dead in bed a few weeks into their retirement, so waiting for retirement was and is not an option for me. That meant I had to do it in stages. Yes there was a plan, but it fitted on a Post-it note. A very small one. Position the boat as well as possible for a crossing or an alternative and see how and where you can go from there.

I started my voyage in the second half of July, a 14-day stint. My goal was Lisbon because it had an airport that allowed me to fly back and forth to Basel, but I only got to Póvoa de Varzim just north of Porto (in fact it is the last stop of the northern branch of the Porto underground system). It turned out that Porto was as easily accessible as Lisbon. In September I transferred *Max* to Vilamoura in the Algarve



and before the end of the year I got her to Marina Arrecife on Lanzarote. Then Covid struck, I had issues with my employer (unrelated to my sailing ambitions since I was only using my normal work-related holidays) and everything suddenly got really complicated ... what the Americans would call a curve ball.





*Île d'Ouessant*



### *One of the best sails of the passage*

see a few satellites coming over. The only communication I had with my sister via my Garmin inReach Mini, though my parents were happy to know where I was.

Every morning I was greeted by a pair of seabirds and I am pretty sure I was also accompanied by some fish near the keel while I was crossing. I think that that was the main reason why I was visited by

### *Cockpit instruments*

The difference between sailing at sea and on a lake is not big. You just have to keep the boat going and make sure you keep a look-out at regular intervals, 15–20 minutes in my case. (The most useful advice I got, from an uncle who used to be an officer in the Merchant Navy, was, ‘Whatever you do, be vigilant between four and six in the morning’. That saved me twice.) One still has the gurgling but additionally the nice hissing sound of the salt water detaching from the hull and the rudder, followed by the brushing sound of sargassum weed when in the trade wind belt. I like to think the sargassum weed is trying to clean the hull, keel and rudder. The movement of the boat is a bit more violent at times and sometimes it is overcast. But nearer to the equator it is still nice and warm even when the sun is not shining.

During the night the stars come out in mind-blowing numbers and the important ones for astro navigation can be easily found. No light pollution. In the middle of the Atlantic there is no – well, more accurately, hardly any – shipping traffic and no aeroplanes overhead. It is silent. No radio, either FM or DAB+. The VHF stays silent as well. Sometimes you can



### *Our first flying fish*

dolphins every now and then. They were eating my pets! I also saw some large shadows in the water when the sun shone through the turquoise-coloured waves. By the shape and size I would assume they were tuna having a look and maybe having a go at my company too. But in general it is the same as on a lake.

Playing with wind and waves, observing the clouds and creatures, listening to the noises the boat, the wind and the water are making and feeling the movements of the boat.



### *Approaching rain*



I left Lanzarote after the 2020 hurricane season finished. I had struck a deal with Rodney Bay Marina that I would have the same Covid restrictions as the ARC fleet and pushed off on 6th December. Actually I was pushed off. The conditions were rough. Books and other stuff were flying around the cabin and at one point I considered wearing a bicycle helmet after I twice missed hitting a cupboard with my head. After a week I was realising that I had at least two more weeks to go, but luckily things calmed down a bit. After 25 days I reached St Lucia, then it took another four days to enter Spaanse Water at Curaçao.

### *The St Lucia courtesy flag*



### **In the middle of the Atlantic nobody will hear you scream!**

Of course all kind of things went wrong. On 23rd December the autopilot broke and I repaired it. Next day it broke again and I repaired it again. After that it kept working for the rest of the way across. My windvane refused to work at all on these trade wind courses, however.

I spent from 0100 to 0700 one night avoiding a big tanker with a red 'Bravo'\* light on a slowly converging course. Another night I spent in the cockpit clutching one of my boat hooks, being afraid of a pirate attack after spotting a vessel that behaved erratically. I thought it might be some Venezuelan marauder looking for loot. Yet another night I went on deck to find that suddenly all the stars and the wind had disappeared. Until then there had always been a few stars in the sky and I had never been totally 'blacked-out'. It felt like the proverbial calm before the storm. I started the engine and slowly motored out of it. In the morning, when I looked back I could see this huge cloud sitting on the water. Just dark, still and silent.

Under normal conditions I refuse to enter an unknown port at night. Of course I arrived at Rodney Bay Marina 2200 on New Year's Eve. No answer from anyone on the VHF. After getting all the lines and fenders out I inched my way to the harbour entrance with the help of my Navionics tablet, which displayed some sort of channel. Suddenly I saw these shadows appearing from the darkness. Anchored sailing yachts without anchor lights. I dropped the

\* The International Code of Signals specifies the red 'Bravo' code flag as meaning, 'I am taking in or discharging or carrying dangerous goods'. At night the flag is replaced by a red light.

*Running butterfly style*



*On the quarantine dock in Rodney Bay, St Lucia*

speed a few knots more. I actually had to wait for another sailing yacht to leave port before I could enter and tie up to what next day appeared to be a superyacht dock.

In St Lucia I only had to do a confirmation Covid test for which the results are normally available within 24 hours. Sadly I had arrived at New Year and 1st and 2nd January are holidays in St Lucia.

The doctor arrived on 3rd January and the result was available that evening, but three of the six days I had reserved for St Lucia had already passed. I spent those three days on a quarantine dock, with a huge metal gate and an impressive padlock and chain keeping it shut. Two nurses checked us every day for symptoms and fever.

An hour after leaving Rodney Bay for Curaçao I ran into some fishing gear which was marked only by some 2 litre bottles containing colourful pieces of cloth. I was able to cut most of it away by reaching down into the water from the swimming platform at the stern, but some stuff, including some smaller Coke bottles, was still dangling from the keel and propeller. I had to return to Rodney Bay and anchor in order to cut away the rest while snorkelling ... all under sail because I didn't dare use the engine.

### Mopping-up

Didn't I have any joy while sailing? Yes, I did. I got to see dolphins, whales, the most intense bioluminescence I have ever witnessed, unbelievably starry skies, moonlit nights so clear you could read a newspaper. I got to collect all the flying fish and squid in the morning from the deck. I learned how to SCUBA dive in Curaçao, something I'd believed was not for me, and had a good look at all the underwater wonders there. When on the water I felt a sense of belonging and being taken care of. What more is there to wish for?

All in all it wasn't too bad and nothing happened that would keep me from giving it another try in the future. I went back to see something of Lanzarote in March this year, mainly the Timanfaya



*The iron gate on the quarantine dock*

National Park. Max had been parked on the island for three years, but because of all the chores and the Covid crisis all I really saw was the capital, Arrecife – mainly the route to Ikea, Lidl and the sailmaker's loft. I still have to see St Lucia and all the other islands in the Caribbean chain. Next time. 🗺️



*Manoeuvring in Willemstad, Curaçao*