

ABOARD SEA JESTER, BOUND FOR THE AZORES

Max Gordon

Ever since discovering my love for the water as a young child, influenced by my father and grandfather alike, I had dreamt of one day making an ocean passage. This dream suddenly became a possibility while I was carrying out work on OCC members Peter and Anabel Merriman's Beneteau Oceanis 48, *Sea Jester*, in 2023. They very kindly offered me the opportunity to sail with them on part of their return from the Caribbean, joining them in Bermuda bound for Horta on the beautiful island of Faial in the Azores.

Prior to this, in 2014 I had sailed with the Ocean Youth Trust aboard *John Laing*, a 72ft bermudan-rigged ketch, gaining me my RYA Competent Crew qualification but perhaps more importantly driving my hunger to spend more time at sea. With this behind me I quickly looked at how I could get back on the water. Luckily, I was a cadet in one of Britain's largest waterborne youth organisations, the Sea Cadet Corps, and during my time as a cadet spent a total of three weeks aboard *TS Royalist* – a week sailing out of Oban on the west coast of Scotland, and then a two-week delivery voyage from London to Halmstad, Sweden ahead of the 2017 Tall Ships' Races. Fast forward to 2019 and I had started working with my father in the rigging industry in Portland on England's south coast. I soon became a member of Weymouth Sailing Club and regularly raced aboard *Apple Jack*, a beautiful example of a 'race ready' Jeremy Rogers-built Contessa 26. The biggest adventure was yet to come, however.

2nd–4th June : Preparation

I had only a few moments to take in the beauty of Bermuda with the backdrop of a wonderful sunset as the aeroplane made its approach, but could instantly see the attraction of the islands. Once on solid ground I made my way to St George's where *Sea Jester* was anchored, meeting Peter and Anabel in the infamous White Horse pub for a catch-up and much-needed drink. Knowing how busy we would be next day preparing the boat for the crossing, we soon headed back aboard to get some rest.

Among the jobs that needed doing were replacing the Windex and anemometer, followed by a rig check. All looked good until I got to the starboard side D1* and discovered that four of the 19 individual wires that make up the shroud had broken underneath the upper swage terminal. To ensure full safety I recommended replacing the shroud, even though it looked as though it might interfere with our plans to leave the following day. By a stroke of luck we were anchored

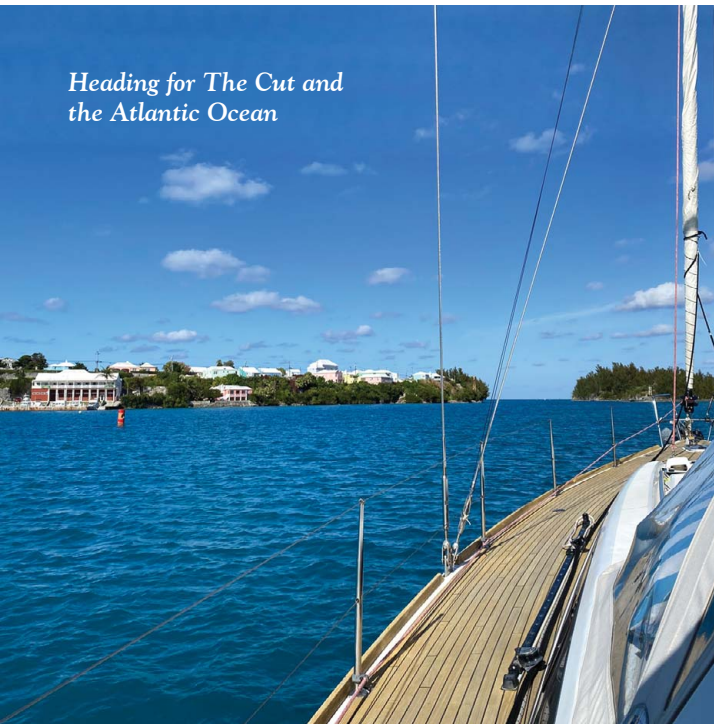
no more than 200m from Ocean Sails, run by fellow OCC members Steve and Suzanne Hollis. We contacted Steve, and

* The D1 is the lowest diagonal shroud and runs from the deck to the base of the first spreader.



Working with Steve from Ocean Sails

*Heading for The Cut and
the Atlantic Ocean*



what a credit to both his company and his island he was! Once we got the D1 down and over to his rigging loft he put his other work aside to get the problem sorted as quickly as possible, and working together we made up a replacement shroud using Sta-Lok swageless terminals. With the new D1 fitted, and following a quick explore around the picturesque town of St George's, we looked to the final task for the day – collecting our fourth and final crew member, Patrick, who was waiting for us at the White Horse pub. Over a final drink we discussed plans for departure and the last couple of jobs that needed doing prior to that.

Departure day was upon us and, with safety briefs and lifejacket fittings complete, we just had to pick up the solar panels. These were threatening our departure as they were still stuck in customs but, with a little charm I'm sure, Peter managed to secure their release. We finally cast off our lines from the refuelling berth at 1700 – next stop the Azores! Navigating our way through The Cut, the narrow fairway which divides St David's Island from St George's, we passed under the stern of an incoming cruise ship, the *Norwegian Gem*. This was to be the first and last bit of traffic we would see for some time.

Before supper we devised the watch system we would be sticking to for the next week or two. With four of us onboard we decided that an 'on watch', 'on standby' and 'golden kip' method would be best. Essentially this meant that after two hours on watch you would move into standby for two hours, perhaps snoozing but staying clothed and ready to be of assistance should the person on watch need you. Then, once the next handover had taken place, you were into your two hours of 'golden kip' for some proper shut-eye. We fell into



Sea Jester's cruising chute at work

this watch system shortly after supper, at around 2000, and with my first watch beginning at midnight I went below to try to get some sleep in preparation. Before lowering myself through the companionway I took a brief glance back at Bermuda, reminding myself that this would be the last piece of land I'd see for at least 14 days.

5th June onwards : The Crossing

The beginning of my first watch was met with some great sailing conditions with 12–14 knots of wind from the port quarter, increasing to just shy of 20 knots within the first 20 minutes. At this point Peter and I decided to put in a reef, typically at the same moment as the heavens decided to open. With the reef in and us both soaked, not having had time to don our foulies mid-reef, the rain calmed as did the wind, dropping back to around 9–12 knots – classic! The rest of the watch was quiet, with Anabel taking over from me at 0200, moving me on to standby and then eventually back to my cabin to sleep.

The cruising chute had been hoisted while I was asleep, a great sight when rising for the morning watch. However, the wind soon dropped to less than 4 knots so the decision was made to drop it and motor until the wind picked up. While steaming along we were joined by a few birds gliding alongside, one of them a white-tailed tropicbird, or 'long tail' as they're known in the Bahamas, which seemingly dipped its wings in salute on its final flypast.

At the start of my watch the following evening I was greeted by a clear Atlantic sky filled, due to the lack of light pollution, with the most stars I'd ever seen. Unfortunately that's where the good news ends, as during the previous watch it had been noted that, at irregular intervals, the engine had been producing clouds of smoke from the exhaust and a distinct smell of diesel. By halfway through my watch the smoke had become constant. Using our head-torches, Peter and I tried to make out the colour of the smoke to help us identify the cause. Although this proved difficult against the clear Atlantic water it did give us a chance to see some marine life, with jellyfish and bioluminescence surrounding the boat. With the engine issues continuing we decided to turn it off and wait for enough wind to sail, so for the remainder of the passage we only used it either when trying to diagnose/fix the problem or approaching an anchorage or harbour.

One of the beauties of being at sea is obviously the wildlife, from marine creatures to the different species of bird. One of the ambitions of all the crew was to see a whale at some point during the passage. We thought the best chance would be close to the Azores, but our first sighting was just four days out of Bermuda. I was below when I had heard an excited yell from Patrick, and rushing to the companionway saw him pointing towards the port quarter. About 200 metres from the boat a black fin briefly broke the surface – it had to be a whale, but the distance meant we couldn't identify the species. Our second and only other encounter with a whale came about six days later. While trimming the headsail with Patrick and Peter I spotted what looked like a puff of smoke coming from the water about 50 metres off the bow. A much bigger whale this time and a lot closer, it passed us on the starboard side showing off its impressive dorsal fin. Although we were thrilled at the encounter, another part of us prayed that it wasn't a hungry orca looking for something to eat in the shape of our rudder! Fortunately such attacks are much rarer where we were compared to off the Spanish coast.

The most comical encounter with marine life came around the ten-day mark, aptly involving a flying fish. We had seen the occasional small flying fish most days up to this point, with a tiny one being found on the deck one morning by Patrick. However, I wasn't ready for the introduction to a larger example that I was about to get. I had just settled into a late-night watch after taking over from Anabel when, about ten minutes in and while looking down at the chart plotter, I felt a hefty blow to the side of my head. Jumping up in astonishment I wondered what on earth could have just struck me, at first thinking it might have been a disorientated bird ... perhaps the booby that had been following us for most of the day? Thoughts were soon revised when a smell of fish engulfed the cockpit, and then I knew exactly what had just happened. Anabel and I burst out laughing and the following day Peter jokingly issued me with a helmet he had lying around on board in case of further strikes!



Wearing my anti-flying fish protection

For the majority of the passage we were being chased down by *Mangata*, an AMEL 50 owned by friends of Peter and Anabel. By mid-morning on the tenth day they were within a mile of us, a distance which shrank rapidly until by 1400 they were sailing alongside us. This gave us the chance to get some great photos of both boats under sail in champagne sailing conditions. With *Mangata* now leaving us in her wake and

our morale firmly boosted, attention soon turned to our planned landfall on the Azorean island of Flores, about three days away.

Our final few days before reaching Flores featured a mixture of little wind and no wind at all. Where we could, in what patches of wind there were, we used the Code 0 to boost boat speed, but no complaints were made as we were joined by pod after pod of dolphins to keep us



*Sea Jester flying along,
taken from Mangata...*

*... and Mangata
overtaking us*

company. As I wandered up into the cockpit on the morning of our arrival I was greeted by the sight of Flores in all its beauty, its green cliffs towering over the Atlantic waters. After battling some flukey winds caused by the island, we dropped anchor at Fajã Grande on its west coast. The anchorage is dwarfed by the huge, green, volcanic cliffs that surround it, with multiple waterfalls along their faces. After 13 days 11 hours and 1788 miles we had reached the Azores.

We spent our time at Fajã Grande swimming and exploring the nearby waterfalls and then dined at the restaurant that overlooks the anchorage. We were to spend only one night there, so I was extra sure to take in the breathtaking views from the cockpit. The following morning

we weighed anchor and sailed round the south coast of the island to Lajes, on its southeast corner. Lajes sustained serious damage to its sea defences during Hurricane *Lorenzo* back in 2019, damage that was still being repaired while we were there. Once the anchor was firmly laid my first impression was of the birdsong coming from the cliffs. We set the tender up and headed ashore to have a look around and find a place to eat, and along the way found ourselves at the lighthouse we had used as a reference point on our approach, standing proud with its red beacon overlooking the waters below.

Patrick managed to get us a table at a restaurant 800 metres up into the hills of Lajes, a walk I definitely felt later in the evening after not doing much walking for the previous two weeks. The food, however, was well worth it. After eating we headed down to the harbour master's office, which doubles as the Clube Naval de Lajes and serves as a bar for locals and visiting yachtsmen alike. It was run by Jorge, the harbour master, a very friendly chap who claimed to sell the cheapest drinks on the island. At one euro for a beer I had no reason to doubt him!



Spectacular Fajã Grande



Lajes lighthouse

The following morning Patrick was leaving us to make his way to Lisbon, so after the others had bade their farewells I dinghied him ashore at around 0600, then headed back to the boat to prepare for departure for Horta on the island of Faial. No more than 20 minutes after leaving we were joined by yet another

Hoisting the courtesy flags in Horta

pod of dolphins playing alongside, a sight we had now grown used to. Healthy winds made for a great start to the short hop southeast to Horta, with a fleet of boats leaving Lajes at around the same time. We arrived the following morning after my final overnight sail of the voyage. Once ashore we checked in with customs and could finally lower the quarantine flag and hoist the courtesy flags of Portugal and the Azores.

With the Azores being a volcanic archipelago which began forming some 10 million years ago we thought it would be good to visit Faial's volcanic *caldera* (crater). We made our way to the rim of the volcano, which stands 1043m above sea level at its highest point. The wind at the top was fierce with varying visibility through the low clouds, but when it did clear what a sight it was into the crater below. The size was simply mesmerising, making walkers on the opposite side look like ants.



My time on *Sea Jester* was quickly coming to an end and my flight to Lisbon creeping up on me too quickly. We still had one job to do, however – paint the boat's emblem on the quayside, a tradition followed by many visiting crews as shown by the sheer number of paintings spanning from one side of the inner harbour to the other. I was able to help with the background of *Sea Jester's* emblem before the rain came in, probably

Pictures left by previous yachts

Sea Jester's completed emblem





Faial's vast caldera

for the best as my art skills have never been great. With the rain calling a halt to painting, my time to leave had sadly arrived. During the short taxi ride to Faial's small airport I reflected on what a trip it had been, with great sailing, beautiful views, fantastic people and memories that I knew would never leave me.

My thanks firstly go to Peter and Anabel for hosting me with great hospitality for the three weeks I was on board – without their kindness and generosity none of it would have been possible. It was also Peter who suggested that I apply for the Youth Sponsorship, even though I was already at sea. Secondly I would like to thank the OCC for accepting me onto the Youth Sponsorship Programme, which made the trip a lot more viable financially. The programme assists young people under the age of 25 to make ocean passages, when otherwise they might not have the opportunity or necessary funds. This voyage taught me many things about myself and ocean passages, which I'll endeavour to take with me through life as I try to make my dream of a life at sea possible.

