



The term 'sell up and sail' is so well used its actual ramifications can be forgotten. Kate Ashe Leonard recounts what the term actually means in real time

# A leap into the unknown

## Becoming a liveboard

I am on night watch alone as we sail to Huahine, in the Society Islands of French Polynesia. There is a low-pressure system just south of us creating unsettled conditions. It's dark but I can tell the clouds are building, obscuring my view. I check our radar and see a significant-looking squall about five miles ahead. I watch its track; it is coming our way. I furl away the genoa, re-set the mainsail and change tack, letting it pass a few miles to port of us. The wind rises to 28kts as the storm blows by, but the clouds soon give way to a clear sky full of stars. I can see Jupiter and Venus shining bright. The full moon rises a little later and reflects off the ocean. Coffee in hand, I check our AIS. Two other boats are going the same way. One Dutch, the other French. All of us are a long way from home, almost as far as we can get. I wonder what led them to be sailing around the world. As we near the half-way mark on our circumnavigation I think back to our beginning. Four and a half years ago, *Polaris* was new to us, and we were untying our dock lines for the very first time.

### ***Our first sail***

It was the perfect time in our lives to do something like this and so, instead of spending years getting my sailing up to speed, we decided to put our energy into finding the right boat to take us safely around the world and get the journey started. I had never really sailed before apart from completing my competent crew course and a two-week Caribbean bareboat charter. I would learn as we went along. My partner Jim had sailed his whole life and would help teach me.

*Polaris* is a Catana 47, and we moved onboard full-time in August 2018. We began with a short passage and our first doublehanded sail was from Canet-en-Roussillon, France, 25 miles south to Port de la Selva in Spain. Having so little experience made me feel vulnerable and very dependent on Jim but I found the experience exhilarating. When we eventually tied up to mooring buoy after several failed attempts, it was clear to me that I had an awful lot to learn. We had our first sundowners



on the trampoline followed by dinner ashore and I thought it might just be worth embracing this lifestyle.

The seasons were turning, and we needed to figure out what we would do for the coming months. The winter weather might be challenging for us as newbie liveboards on a boat we hardly knew yet. After some research we secured a long-term winter berth in Marina di Ragusa, Sicily. I'd heard there was a vibrant liveboard community there. The months spent in the marina would provide a safe haven while we got to grips with the myriad of systems onboard and prepared ourselves and *Polaris* for the miles of sailing ahead.

**ABOVE**  
*Polaris* motorsailing in virtually no wind

**PREVIOUS PAGE**  
Heading through the Corinth Canal, Greece

**BELOW**  
Kate and partner Jim

### ***Sailing to Sicily***

My second sail to Sicily was about 700 nautical miles. We took two crew to reduce the pressure on Jim for that first multi-day passage. Jim and I sat two night-watches together and the other two took a watch each. On the second morning we saw dolphins, then a whale breached a quarter of mile off our starboard side, and we landed our first fish onboard. This was why we wanted to live on a boat. The following day the furling drum of our genoa seized and with difficulty we wound it up roughly by hand. A few days later the gennaker began to billow out; the torsion rope wasn't strong enough to maintain a tight wrap and we had to wrestle it to the trampoline to secure it. I was seeing the highs and lows of sailing life in quick succession. The passage provided a good shake-down though and gave us plenty to do after we arrived. Our berth in Sicily was against the harbour wall overlooking the rugged sandy beach which lines the town of Marina di Ragusa. The Ragusa province boasts several enchanting baroque towns worth exploring nearby. The culinary and cultural experiences available in Sicily exceeded all expectations but it was the cruising community there that we will remember the most.

### ***Winter in Sicily***

Becoming a liveboard is an entire lifestyle change, it's not just sailing. Immersing ourselves amongst people





who had embraced life onboard was invaluable and helped us to develop a liveaboard mindset. We learned to be more resourceful in problem solving and more careful and forward thinking about the supplies we gathered, how they would be used and how long they'd last. In time we became ultra-aware of every detail of the boat including its idiosyncrasies, unique noises and highly attuned to the weather outside at all times. Most of all we were learning to be as expert as possible in using, maintaining and fixing every system onboard. With dreams to sail to the remotest corners of the world, our goal was to gradually be almost completely self-sufficient. That first winter in Marina

di Ragusa, we were a long way off that but at least we understood where we needed to get to.

We continued to get to know *Polaris* throughout winter on day sails from the marina. We tried out every point of sail with each sail to understand her sweet spots better and in different conditions. Jim continued to teach me the basics in the hope that they would soon become second nature to me. I was a cautious learner with a healthy fear of the powerful sails, lines and winches. We purchased a spinnaker and installed the hardware required for flying it, our friends in the marina came out to lend a hand and experiment with us on a sunny November afternoon.

**ABOVE**  
Marina di Ragusa, Sicily, a big favourite with bluewater travellers

**BELOW**  
A moody winter shot of Marina di Ragusa beach

*Polaris* came with no spares even though she was second-hand, and we spent the winter sourcing and procuring parts as well as building a very comprehensive tool kit. We were learning how vital having the right tool for the job is. In the meantime, we were surrounded by an experienced group of sailors who were happy to lend us things we needed to get various work done. The learning curve was sometimes steep and often their moral support helped us get the jobs finished.

Our first ever upgrades included replacing our batteries with AGMs, which we would later change again to lithium, as we understood what our power requirements would become. Jim also installed our radar, involving many hours up the mast and a lot of patience pulling wires. We replaced our furling system on our genoa and tried different rigging set-ups to get our gennaker to wrap tightly, experimenting with different options.

Bonds between sailors run deep and many of the people we met that winter are still good friends. We sailed on each other's boats and shared our hopes, fears and frustrations. A woman who had circumnavigated taught me provisioning tips and tricks as well as longer term food storage techniques. We were also kitting out the boat domestically, gathering useful items such as Tupperware containers to keep bugs out of food, a large



## Becoming a liveaboard



pressure cooker, which was energy efficient, and an electric plug-in stove top as back up for our gas cooker to name just a few. I was one of the least experienced sailors in the marina although there were quite a few who had just completed their first season. Of the longer term liveaboards, many said they had no intention of going back to normal land life – I wanted to be one of them.

Our goal to complete a global circumnavigation sounded ambitious and abstract at that point but things began to feel a bit more concrete when we attended a series of Atlantic crossing workshops hosted by some cruisers in the marina. Stories from experienced transatlantic sailors were shared and medical, health and safety issues were discussed. A cruising doctor gave advice on which medications to stock up on too. While some were planning to join the ARC others like us preferred not to be part of an organised rally. We would rather leave in the best possible conditions, on a date chosen by us. Our plan was beginning to gain momentum.

### *Leaving the marina*

By May we were ready to depart. We would explore Greece for the summer months before turning west, where our bows would mainly be pointed for years to come. It felt intimidating leaving the marina after nine months. After a spirited send off by the remaining cruisers, we ended up sailing a short way down to the Porto Palo at the southernmost tip of the island as a warm-up. After a night there the conditions were not yet ideal for a crossing to Preveza, Greece and so we sailed to

Syracuse instead where we spent two more nights until the 20+kt winds moderated. We left Sicily then and I did the first solo night watches of my life, I loved it although the responsibility was intense. Our watch schedule consisted of two three-hour night watches each, a routine we have kept for every multi-day passage since. A total of 280 miles later we arrived safely although in the dark. Nowadays our timing is better, and we will always slow the boat if necessary to avoid arriving in unfamiliar anchorages in darkness.

### *Four months in Greece*

In Greece the fickle winds taught us how quickly we must pre-empt the need to reef or react to a change in wind direction. The short wave period often made for uncomfortable sailing, although fortunately I never suffered from seasickness. The wind acceleration zones, which seemed to lie around the corner of every island, kept us on our toes. I learned how to spot squalls upwind of us and to notice gusts moving across the water toward us – important nuances in

**ABOVE LEFT**  
Syracuse Piazza, Sicily

**ABOVE RIGHT**  
Monemvasia, Greece

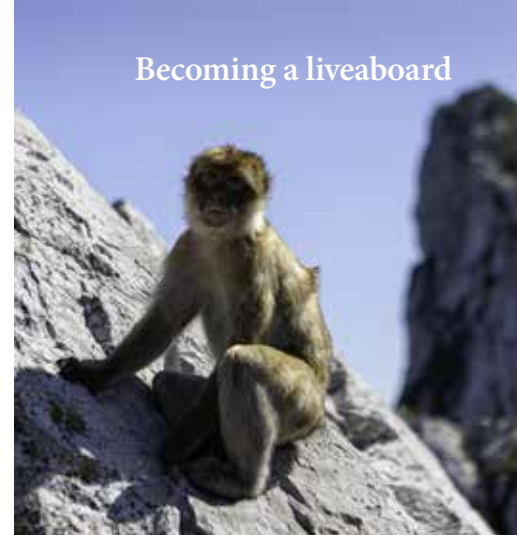
**BELOW**  
Skipper Jim at the helm

conditions I would never have really paid attention to before sailing life. We tacked, we gybed, we swapped roles to ensure we were proficient at both sides of a procedure; furling, unfurling sails, putting reefs in, raising and dropping the main, helming, anchoring, man-overboard drills, operating the VHF, Med mooring. Transiting our first ever canal, the Corinth canal, will be something I will never forget. When we reached the Aegean in July, the Meltemi winds were in full swing, gusting over 40kts sometimes. It was a constant battle to get to the best sheltered anchorage before the next big blow. We dragged anchor once which was frightening since we were med moored to a huge rock. Another time a boat dropped its anchor on top of ours causing a bit of a tangle at the town dock in Poros. Our passarelle got smashed up there too when a local ferry neglected to slow down, creating a huge wake.

Before longer passages we discuss the weather forecast, timing and route options after consulting Predictwind. We agreed there was

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a good window to leave Greece and sail to Malta. The approach was thrilling, passing dozens of tankers and container ships in a shallow area, as they waited to pick up cargo and depart for their next port. This time, 308nm later we arrived at Manoel Island boatyard where we would haul-out. Life in the boatyard was hot and would be good practice for the subsequent haul outs ahead as we sailed around the world. It took us a month to complete our jobs. We left with emptier pockets but peace of mind; we had fresh bottom paint, new thru-hulls, repair of slight rudder damage completed and some other minor repairs. I remember feeling concerned that all our friends were already far ahead of us to the west, it was now September. But onboard *Polaris* we move at our own pace, we pick our own weather windows, and we are not influenced by trying to run with the crowd. We would still have plenty of time to get ourselves down to the Canary Islands, with a plan to cross the Atlantic around mid-December weather permitting.

Provisioning is a constant process and for months before we left the med we had been stocking up on food and drinks, medical and first aid supplies, as well as gathering safety items including personal AIS beacons, getting our life-raft tested and a new EPIRB. In Malta, Jim had installed our Iridium Go external antenna which we bought from Predict wind. This would give us satellite communications at sea including twice daily weather forecasts.

We made our way from Malta to Sardinia with my stepfather as crew on the two-night passage, the perfect distance to give him a chance

to sample life onboard at sea. We caught a huge tuna en route and our freezer was full. We spent just three nights in Sardinia but enjoyed some downtime lazing on the powdery white sand beaches and hanging out at a lagoon nearby with its 100s of pink flamingos. We needed to keep moving and said goodbye to our crew. Next, we headed to Cartagena in Spain, 490nm away.

Cartagena was a useful pit stop where we stocked up on lots of Spanish goods and received plenty of last-minute packages purchased online. The port is enormous and often hosts several cruise ships. It also has interesting roman ruins in the town and the tapas is delicious. After a few weeks there we skipped down the coast to Estepona, our last stop in Spain before reaching Gibraltar.

### ***Gibraltar to Lanzarote***

We secured a berth in the neighbouring Spanish town of La Linea, a short 20-minute walk across the airport runway from Gibraltar itself. There was an energetic atmosphere – lots of other boat crews were also preparing to cross the Atlantic in the coming months. One day we took a cable car up the rock of Gibraltar where



#### **ABOVE LEFT**

*Polaris* hauled out in Malta

#### **ABOVE CENTRE**

Close encounter with a liner off Carthagena

#### **RIGHT**

Monkeys on the rock of Gibraltar

#### **BELOW**

Marina Rubicon, Lanzarote

lots of cheeky monkeys live and spend their days trying to frighten tourists. From the top we looked out at the Atlantic waiting for us.

We left La Linea eight days later and headed into the Atlantic onboard *Polaris*. There had been many milestones so far, but this felt like the first point of no return. We were committed. The swell was big, but the waves were long and comfortable. We sailed south keeping 100nm off the Moroccan coast to avoid fishing nets. Jim spotted a dimly lit net which extended for miles, but we managed to avoid it. A few days out the wind died, and we ended up motor sailing for the remainder of the passage.

With our longest sail yet at 588nm complete, we tied up at Marina Rubicon, Lanzarote. This volcanic island is full of incredible hikes, dive sites, vineyards and delicious food. The marina, set beside a very popular tourist resort, is pleasant and has a swimming pool. It is more complicated to import parts with customs there and we were very glad we had already sourced most of what we needed back in the Mediterranean. With frequent low-cost flights available we made a trip home, knowing that soon it would be more expensive and complicated to do so as we sailed further from Europe.

A month later back onboard *Polaris* we were completing our final checks and we faced some new decisions on whether to bring crew for the Atlantic crossing and which route to take. As a team we had proven we could safely sail 1,000s of miles happily together. We had tackled lots of hurdles and yet the highs still outweighed the inevitable lows by a long stretch. I couldn't wait to cross the Atlantic. ✦