

# An Irishwoman sailing around the world: 'Only when I'm back in Dublin I notice how I've changed'

Settling down scares Kate Ashe-Leonard more than crossing oceans



Life on board is physical – cranking winches, lugging fuel and heavy backpacks full of food for miles, steering our vessel, keeping watch

**Kate Ashe-Leonard**

Thu May 2 2024 - 06:01

We plunge beneath the thick clouds that hang stubbornly over Dublin. I get back about once a year if we can find somewhere safe and affordable to leave our floating home.

I see Howth head, then morning traffic on dark, wet slippery roads that remind me it's February.

We touch down and I am giddy with anticipation, I've been looking forward to this day for months. Living on a boat, over halfway through our circumnavigation, currently located in Australia, makes visiting complicated, but coming home is as essential to the adventure as sailing.

I fall naturally into the same old rhythm of the household in which I grew up. I indulge in the conveniences of land life; seemingly endless running water, hot showers and central heating in a house that neither rocks nor moves its address at all.

I spend the first days grappling with jet lag, but soothed by the gentle rise and fall of familial intonations.

Time here is precious – I'm painfully aware the return trip to the airport is mere weeks away. The days ahead will be packed with long walks, meals and catching up by the fire. I soak it all in.

I run my old route along the canal, past the places I used to frequent. I'm alert to passersby, searching their faces, expecting to see someone familiar. But, outside my immediate inner circle, most people I know have moved on themselves. They've started families, some have bought houses.

I consider the road not taken and yet, I couldn't see myself settling down, that scares me more than crossing oceans.

Outside the window of my childhood bedroom, rain obscures my view of the garden, leaving a vague impression instead. My mind wanders to some of the places I've sailed to recently in an effort to keep myself warm – French Polynesia, Tonga, Fiji, Vanuatu, New Caledonia.

I think of how the last five-and-a-half years sailing has altered me – it seems only when I'm in Dublin that I notice how.

Life on board is physical – cranking winches, lugging fuel and heavy backpacks full of food for miles, steering our vessel, keeping watch. I suppose I'm healthier and more resourceful. I've had to become more flexible in mindset and willing to take risks. But I also cling to routines – I need structure to counterbalance a life dominated by constantly moving and the weather.

I'm often asked how I could ever revert to a more conventional existence.

The level of stimulation on board is something I've grown accustomed to. We've dodged tropical cyclones and hurricanes, electrical storms, cargo ships and even whales. We've sailed in frightening and violent conditions, being pushed to the limit physically and mentally. Every port involves navigating new customs and cultures.

(Continued on next page)



'I've fallen in love with the world beneath the ocean's surface,' says Kate Ashe-Leonard.

To some, I realise it sounds exhausting and nightmarish, but I find the opposite is true – it gives me energy. It makes me stronger. Life is more colourful than I knew possible, the landscapes are always changing.

I've fallen in love with the world beneath the ocean's surface. Our planning, hard work and perseverance is rewarded by the wild and remote places we can choose to visit.

Sailing while living aboard full-time might be as close to freedom as it is possible to get on this earth. We physically move ourselves around the world using the wind to propel us and the sun to power our systems. We sail under the stars, following our own route and solving our own problems.

### ***Coming home becomes critical like breathing; I must come back to my loved ones; I must know they are okay***

Being far from family is one of the greatest challenges I face, and these annual visits make that sacrifice more bearable. Without them, I'm not sure I could keep going. There's a point I reach every year when I become distracted and obsessed with trying to get back. Coming home becomes critical like breathing; I must come back to my loved ones; I must know they are okay. They need that same reassurance too. I can see it in the way they look at me, searching, and how they really listen.

We try to squeeze a year's worth of quality time into weeks and for that reason it is bittersweet. When the inevitable ending arrives, it's inconceivably difficult and I ask myself how I can possibly leave.

(Continued on next page)

The goodbyes tear me apart and yet, something instinctive pushes me back to sea – to the home and life we have cultivated on-board. It's where we belong.

We fly back to the boat, distracting ourselves from the grief of saying goodbye with practical things – we clean the place and hose down the cockpit.

We jump into the dinghy and go ashore to provision. We reconnect with nearby sailors, swapping ideas and timelines. We plot routes to Indonesia, debating whether to sail back east through some of the southwestern Pacific islands first.

Without doubt, we have some intense passages ahead with unknown challenges, but the visit home has invigorated us.

Our hearts are full, our determination is renewed. We're ready to face the oceans.