

Oceans Apart

Blue water cruiser Kate Ashe-Leonard looks back at the preparation, trepidation and exhilaration of her first Atlantic crossing





We are at anchor in Fiji's pristine waters and tropical heat with kiteboarders and wing-foilers dashing by, but we've put our own gear away. Instead, we sit behind our laptops, sipping our coffees while analysing the weather and making departure plans. It has been gusting relentlessly over 30kts for weeks. We are itching to leave but we know it is wiser to wait. We have just two more passages until we complete our transit across the Pacific and arrive in Australia via Vanuatu.

As we prepare ourselves for the miles ahead, I think back to the first time we crossed an ocean. What an adventure that was. Out there on the Atlantic, surfing its swell, being pushed along by the wind, and catching fish. The replenishing sight of the sun rising, the magic of sailing into the sunset at the close of each day and the silence of most nights except for the slight hum of the rigging and the whirring of waves. No light pollution, a sky full of stars, dolphins dancing in phosphorescence stirred up our wake. We face these next ocean passages with similar feelings of apprehension and excitement for what is to come – the unknown. It was this first transatlantic passage that made us certain we wanted to continue sailing around the world and chasing adventure.

Lanzarote

I had been nervous for days. The waiting, the preparations, the sense of one-way-ness about sailing across an ocean; away from Europe, from family and everything I knew. It was these things too that filled my mind with possibility, and I took my nerves as a sign – this was something to be conquered, something really worth doing. The wind barrelled through Marina Rubicon, Lanzarote reaching as high as 45kts. We watched from the safety of our cockpit on *Polaris* tied up to her berth as two monohulls dragged across the bay just in front of the marina at an alarming pace. We leapt to our feet and ran towards the end of the dock to decide if there was something we could do. A dinghy sped towards one of the

ABOVE
Marina Rubicon, Lanzarote – setting off point for this adventure

BELOW
Last minute prep in Lanzarote

boats closely followed by another. Both owners were quickly back onboard. The sea out there was a mess of white water, the wind was so powerful many sailors in the marina had removed their sails. It had been like this for days and days as we waited for a weather window for the first leg of our Atlantic crossing to Mindelo, on the island of Sao Vicente in the Cape Verde islands.

Crew Arrival

We had recently received two important guests onboard; our crew for this leg and perhaps the one after that to Antigua if things went well. Initially, we were not too happy about the prospect of having these guys join us because until now, for the last 4,300 miles it had just been my partner Jim and





me. We had a very set routine and worked well as a doublehanded team. Introducing strangers into our home felt like more of a risk than a benefit however, because it was our first ever ocean passage, our insurance company mandated that we bring two additional crew. Selecting them had been a painstaking process and we deliberated over 50 applications. It turns out there are lots of people who want to sail across the Atlantic, especially on a comfortable catamaran.

The right attitude and personality were more important to us than sailing experience and after a few days it seemed we had probably chosen well. We dined in the nearby restaurants and went on a few hikes together before getting busy with boat work in the lead up to departure. I felt we had good chemistry as a group: they were both fun but had a serious, focused side. We were also conscious that the crew might be anxious about

stepping onto a boat with us and by spending time working with us onboard, learning more about our experience, the boat itself and our safety orientated attitude I think they were reassured.

Leg one: Lanzarote to Sao Vicente

It was late November and the end of hurricane season when finally, the conditions began to settle down and a window to sail south to the Cape Verde islands presented itself. We were relieved to be able to start sailing and stop running around all day every day preparing. It's nerve wracking setting out on a long passage especially this first one with crew. Friends in the marina helped untie our dock lines and we set off.

For the first few days there was barely a ripple on water until our bows cut through it and so we reluctantly motorsailed a bit. Sitting around the cockpit table, because of the absence of swell, we easily spotted a whale off

ABOVE LEFT
Mid ocean life aboard *Polaris*

ABOVE RIGHT
Polaris' Red Duster bids farewell to Lanzarote

BELOW LEFT
Whale flukes were sighted early on in the voyage

BELOW RIGHT
Skipper Jim at the helm

ALL PHOTOS: JIM HOOPER

our stern and later random splashes that got closer and closer turned out to be a large pod of dolphins that came to play between our bows. On the fourth day we landed two enormous Mahi Mahi concurrently after both fishing reels began to scream. Soon after, Jim also hooked a Mahi and we literally had fish to feed the four of us for weeks packed away in the freezer.

We treated this leg as a training passage to ensure the crew fitted our requirements but also to get more proficient at different sail configuration like using our →





spinnaker, something we hadn't used much in the Mediterranean. The fairly benign conditions we experienced meant we could do just that and, on another occasion, we sailed wing and wing using our mainsail and genoa. We took one night watch each throughout the passage and rotated watches more casually during daylight hours.

The passage had been trouble-free and idyllic. We worked well as a team and, with Jim and I getting twice as much sleep as usual, we had more energy throughout the day to playing cards, backgammon and tell stories from our respective lives. Sailing doublehanded on longer passages does not allow much time for anything other than sailing, cooking, eating, sleeping, and watch keeping.

Arrival at Mindelo, Sao Vicente

On the sixth day we could see Sao Vicente in the distance and I felt a rush of euphoria. We had

successfully completed the first segment of our journey across the Atlantic with our crew. Adrenalin disguised how tired we all were and after tidying up we went to the bar where we enjoyed the atmosphere, meeting other cruisers and making calls home to family now we had internet.

Before getting back into preparation mode for our onward passage, we took some time to explore the colourful, vibrant town. We traipsed through local shops and fresh produce markets and attended some lively sessions at local jazz clubs. We managed to squeeze in some kitesurfing too, acutely aware of the tiger sharks who are known to frequent the area. We hired a driver to give us a tour of the island and from high up in the mountains surrounded by cactus plants we could see lush green rolling hills, as well as scorched earth stretching for miles from a

ABOVE LEFT
Mindelo marina, Sao Vicente in the Cape Verde Islands

ABOVE RIGHT
Kite boarders in action in the Cape Verdes

BELOW LEFT
Mindelo town

BELOW RIGHT
The stark, rugged scenery of the north coast of Sao Vicente

prolonged dry spell they'd had. As we looked out past Sao Vicente to the vast ocean awaiting us, I was reminded of the looming passage.

Preparing to depart for Antigua

After seven days of sightseeing, provisioning, cleaning, making water and going through all our final tasks the weather looked good for a sporty sail to Antigua. Although stronger than we would like, blowing 30kts from behind, both the wind and swell were forecast to steadily reduce in the following days. We spent our last day lying around by the pool reading and planned to leave early the next morning after replenishing our fuel supply. The conditions at the dock had been unpleasant for the duration of our stay due to the wind direction making sleeping difficult. We were exhausted and ready to leave.

When morning came, everyone was slightly on edge which is normal, we knew the passage →





ahead would be long, likely to take about two weeks. However, things are rarely straightforward when it comes to sailing. Due to an electricity outage in the marina, we couldn't get fuel and reluctantly decided to stay another day in order to top up. We would try to depart the following day instead.

Leg two

On departure day at 10am we got ready to untie our lines. We had an audience of friends there to help and cheer us on. There was a strong 25kts+ pushing us away from the dock and Jim's task to navigate us out of our berth was a daunting one; there was a spider web of mooring lines ahead as well as some vacant mooring buoys and a few local fishing boats. Tricky at the best of times. The fact that *Polaris* doesn't have keels and the absence of bow thrusters means that we drift sideways easily. With the wind pushing us out of the spot Jim expertly managed to helm the boat without us being blown sideways onto the myriad of obstacles. Jim, looking a little pale before the manoeuvre, had said 'this might be the shortest Atlantic crossing of all time,' but he did it! We were out, unscathed and could hear shouts of praise from the crowd at the dock. We turned and waved, as the land began to shrink behind us.

Phase one

This passage was not one to ease into gradually. We had 25-30kts as soon as we left the marina and as captain Jim was monitoring everything like a hawk, conscious of the fact

that we might have become rusty during our break in Mindelo or be complacent after the smooth first leg. The cockpit quickly became wet and slippery because of a few large waves that had crashed in over our stern and the angle of the swell jolted us all over the place. Every step was placed with great care and all hand holds around the boat were used to prevent us falling around. In the galley I was relieved that I had prepared a pressure cooker meal the night before and only had to set the table and heat the food. Even that proved dangerous and at one point I nearly fell down the stairs.

These conditions were not for the faint hearted and the first few nights at sea were tense ones: we all struggled to settle into a sustainable rhythm. For days we only had a sliver of genoa out and we were still surfing down waves doing up to 15kts. Waves

ABOVE LEFT
Relaxing sailing with the spinnaker up

BELOW
Prepping the spinnaker

pounded the inside of the hulls like a drum continually startling us. One of our crew was seasick and by day four both reported not being able to get a proper sleep during their off watches.

Phase two

Just as I began to despair the forecasted more moderate weather materialised and the atmosphere onboard was transformed back to something reminiscent of the previous passage. The wind had dropped to 20kts, and we were on a broad reach using the mainsail and genoa. With the smaller swell everything became more peaceful, we were racing along comfortably at last. As before, we each did a night watch and spent 10 minutes or so during the hand over to have a chat. Watch keeping, writing, reading and stargazing easily filled those dark hours and I spotted dolphins in our





wake under the full moon. During the day, our fishing lines were out again, and we hung out playing games and sharing meals together. Although we knew we might never have crew again I was really glad that we had the extra company of these two people who had become good friends of ours. We traded books and introduced each other to favourite podcasts. As I took over one of our crew's watches, he handed me a sketch he had done of *Polaris* sailing, the date and our coordinates, above it he scrawled 'Happy Half-way.'

We were over halfway across the Atlantic when I realised, I'd found something for which I was well designed. As a creature of habit, I loved the routine as well as having time and space for reflection. The immediacy of the experience with the only priorities being the comfort and safety of the boat and crew as

well as ensuring our onward progress was refreshingly simple. Everything else could wait. To me, it was the ocean crossing that was the reward more so than the destination. After all the months of hard graft to get the boat ready and all the difficult lessons learned as new boat owners, we had made it out here to this endless blue abyss. We had reached a point where the days seemed to blend into one and I didn't want to arrive and break the spell.

Phase three

But all good things must come to an end and soon all four of us were inevitably getting excited at the prospect of arriving in the paradise island of Antigua. The weather had changed again and now we had only about 10kts true. The more we wanted to arrive the lighter the wind seemed to become. It was

ABOVE LEFT
An aerial shot taken mid Atlantic

ABOVE
Relaxing mid ocean

BELOW
Polaris in Nelson's Dockyard, Antigua



ABOUT THE AUTHORS
Kate Ashe-Leonard and Jim Hooper have now sailed 19,000 miles four years after purchasing *Polaris*. Almost half-way through their circumnavigation, they are currently cruising French Polynesia. In the coming months they will continue their voyage west.
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time to get the spinnaker out and we had three blissfully calm days lazing on the trampoline reading with another visit from dolphins and another Mahi Mahi in the freezer. We were now in the final strait. We decided to book a few nights in Nelson's Dockyard Marina before heading out to anchor. We were not there yet though. We were tracking to arrive in the middle of the night and, as if to draw the passage out further, we put the spinnaker away and replaced it with a triple reefed genoa. This would help to reduce our average speed to just 3kts and ensure an early morning arrival.

At the first sight of land, I exhaled and took a moment to appreciate the gravity of the feelings I had about crossing my first ocean. But we still had a few miles to go. We each took turns hand steering in beautiful tranquil conditions, getting the most out of the last hours of our Atlantic crossing experience. As we turned into English harbour, navigating our way through dozens of boats and superyachts, we were surrounded by green landscaped gardens with palm trees and exotic flowers. Pelicans flew overhead as the dockhands caught our lines. On the land I could see the historic colonial-era buildings of Nelson's dockyard. It was the day before Christmas Eve and the atmosphere was festive. We'd made it. We high-fived, hugged and congratulated one another. We had each drawn something important from the passage and for me it was the feeling of having found a purpose: something big and challenging that I wanted to continue for years to come.

