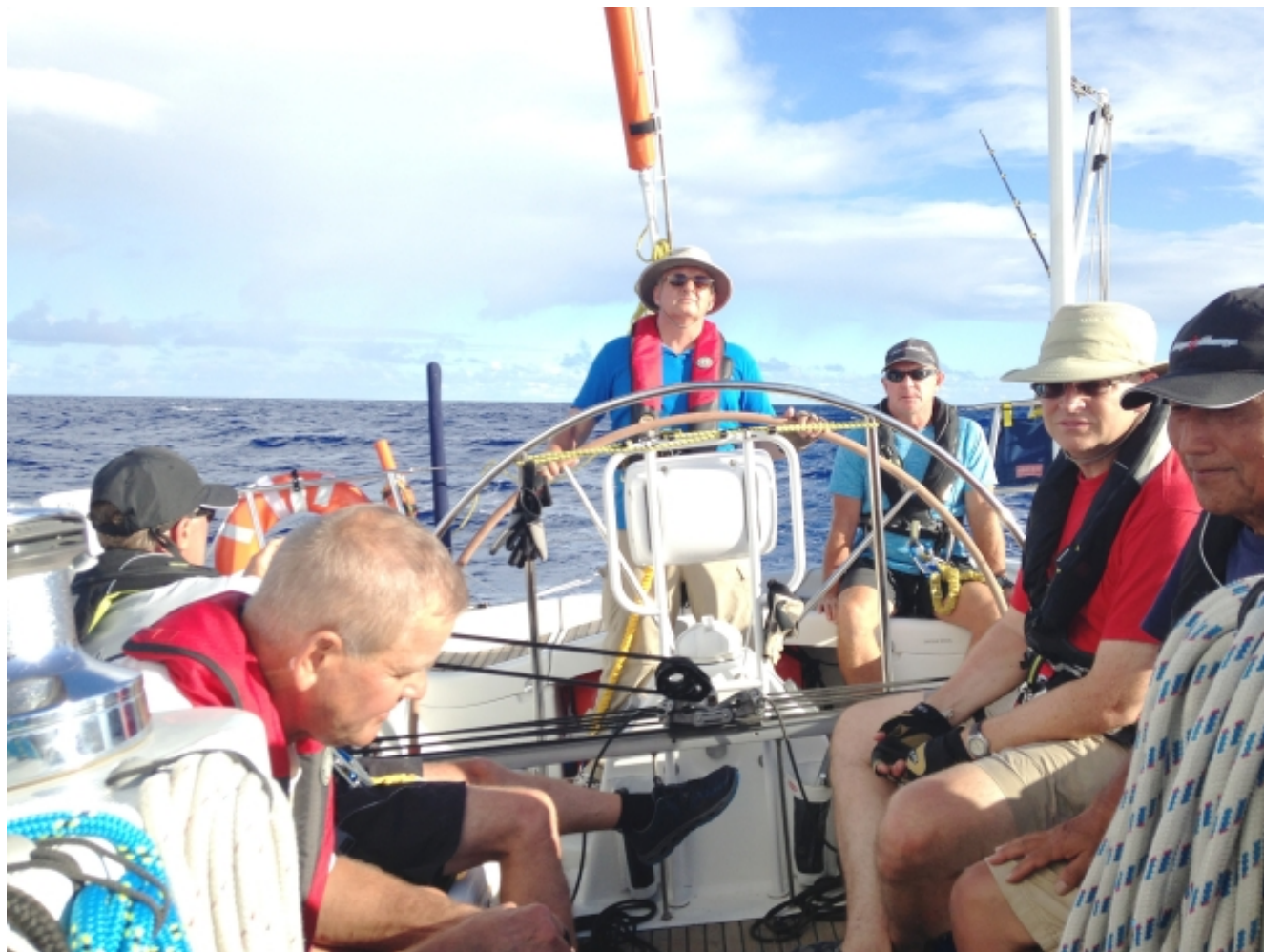


Post-race sail to Vancouver an adventure not to be missed

Dolphin escort and spectacular sunsets

BY CHRISTOF MARTI, SPECIAL TO THE SUN AUGUST 19, 2014



The crew of String Theory on their return voyage to Vancouver. Christof Marti/Special to the Sun

The 2014 Victoria to Maui Yacht race is history, and most of the competitors took the fast way home aboard a comfortable jetliner. For a small group of sailors however, the end of the race marked the start to an adventure of a lifetime. They committed to sailing one of the race boats back to Vancouver, more than 4,000 kilometres across the Pacific Ocean.

We cast off the bowlines last month and pulled away from the dock in Lahaina, waving goodbye to families and friends. The palm trees and sandy beaches soon faded into the background, the wind picked up and before we knew it, our boat String Theory, pounded into the oncoming waves. At sunset, we had a last look back at Maui, knowing that the next time the sun would appear over the horizon there would be nothing but water as far as the eye could see.

After two days of rough sailing in strong winds, everybody grew their sea legs and we settled into a routine of watch keeping on deck, domestic duties and resting. Life offshore is very simply: Sail, eat and sleep! The crew was split into two watches (shifts) alternatively staying on deck running the boat or resting below.

A highlight of the day was happy hour. Every evening at watch change we all gathered on deck to socialize with the other team. We shared stories about fish so big that they ripped the line with the lure, how fast the boat surfed down that big wave and one crew member could have sworn he saw a mermaid. Both the fish and the wave became bigger each time the story was told.

Sunsets at sea can be spectacular. One evening early during the voyage, the sun disappeared behind a few towers of cumulus clouds; the sea underneath glowed like lava, setting the ocean on fire. Words can hardly describe it, a picture does not do it justice. We will carry the glow of the ocean in our memories.

With the sun gone, Saturn and Mars became our trusted companions. While we used modern electronic navigation systems, sailing by the stars at night was a delight. Every morning, Venus appeared on the horizon, indicating yet another day is about to begin. With Venus on the rise, the dark sky gave way to a light shimmer on the horizon. The stars slowly disappeared as a hue of yellow and orange sunshine coated the distant clouds and eventually the first sun rays pierced through the scattered clouds.

Food aboard was delicious: Lamb roast, barbecues, lasagna, tropical fruit and salads, fresh-baked bread, brownies and sometimes pancakes for breakfast. Catching fresh Mahi Mahi (Dorado), however, trumped it all. Fresh sashimi or filet baked in the oven, both tasted delicious. Rumour has it that our onboard doctor is thinking about a career change, having too much fun fileting fresh fish.

Offshore sailing is not without challenges. Early on we had electrical issues and were not getting enough charge into the batteries. We soon discovered it was a faulty alternator. Our skipper had a spare alternator on board and our ship engineer installed it successfully. Eighty per cent of a successful offshore passage is in the preparation. String Theory was certainly a top-notch sailing platform ready to take on pretty much anything thrown at her and the crew.

About half way through our journey, we were more than 2,000 kilometres from any point of land. There are not many points on Earth where one can be farther away from terra firma. Point Nemo in the South Pacific, the point farthest from land on Earth, is only a little bit more isolated.

For most of the voyage, no Coast Guard helicopter or ship could reach us, a deep-sea cargo boat might be days away. In a time where we are connected every moment of the day, help is just a phone call away and every eventuality is covered with an insurance policy, sailing offshore remains an adventure. The crew needs to be self sufficient and make do with whatever they have available onboard.

One afternoon, while checking in with some of the other boats from the return fleet over the radio, I heard shouts from above deck: "Dolphins, dolphins." Up I ran, donning a life vest on the way, camera at the ready, and there they were: Darting through the water like arrows, dozens of dolphins chased String Theory. They launched into the air with ease, then dove under the boat and headed for the bow wave jockeying for the best position. At times more than 20 dolphins swam right in front of our bow, dancing a ballet. Three, four, then five dolphins jumping in perfect unison; arcing through the air before splashing back into the indigo water.

The spectacle lasted maybe 20 minutes before we were once again alone on the big, wide ocean. We

also spotted sharks, orcas, a few lonely albatross and millions of sailing jellyfish called Valella. To our relief, the much dreaded debris was almost non-existent.

Slowly, we closed in on the Canadian coast. On Day 14: "Land Ho!" Our ship's engineer spotted the mountains of Vancouver Island in the distance. They soon disappeared into a thick bank of fog, an unmistakable sign we were back in the Pacific Northwest.

Twenty four hours later, we entered Vancouver harbour and docked the boat at the Coal Harbour Marina, where friends and family awaited us with champagne and a feast that rivalled the banquet for the race teams in Maui. Despite being exhausted, we celebrated late into the night, sharing stories with our loved ones and friends. As the evening went on, the fish grew bigger than the arms could stretch, the waves were surely towering close to 10 metres above us and there must have been a much more than 100 dolphins playing around us.

A last aloha from team String Theory. See you in 2016, during the 50th anniversary of the Vic-Maui race!

Christof Marti is the owner of Simply Sailing School in Vancouver (simplysailing.ca) and is a both director on the Board of BC Sailing and the Vancouver Rowing Club. Trained as an engineer and with an MBA in finance, Christof is also a qualified sailing instructor and a certified Yachtmaster. He will be filing reports from B.C.'s coastal waters over the season.

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