

Knowing when to abort sailing trip is crucial

Equipment malfunctions and weather contribute to decision

BY CHRISTOF MARTI, SPECIAL TO THE SUN FEBRUARY 10, 2015



The seas rise to present another challenge. Christof Marti/Special to The Sun

The author crewed on an failed attempt to cross the Atlantic late last year. This is the second part of his account of the sailing.

Shortly after leaving Puerto Calero on Lanzarote, Canary Islands, we sailed through the channel

between the southernmost tip of Lanzarote and Fuerteventura. Dolphins approached us, just as they had on our last passage. Watching the dolphins darting along beside a sailboat never fails to captivate me. Perched on the bow of our boat the Shanty, my feet dipping into the crests of passing waves, it felt like the best place on Earth.

Lanzarote was fast disappearing on our stern as we navigated towards Las Palmas. With a moderate breeze and the waves on our stern, this was some of the finest sailing we experienced on the Atlantic.

The sun set over the ocean, the water glowed as it reflected the light and we glided effortlessly towards our destination, Grenada 5,000 km to the west. Little did we know that Poseidon had a different plan for us.

The unusual weather pattern might have been an indication of our very challenging passage. The expected tradewinds did not develop. Instead, an approaching low-pressure system from the Cape Verdes forced us to sail a much more northerly route than the traditional tactic I was advised before leaving: "Head south until the butter melts, then turn west until you make landfall."

Seven days into the crossing, things started to go south very quickly. First, I noted that our batteries were not getting charged. Initially, not knowing what the cause was, we shut down all non-essential electrical equipment. We powered down the fridge, navigation and communication systems and interior lights, using our headlamps only.

While it is entirely possible to sail around the world with minimal electrical equipment, modern yachts heavily rely on power.

With no fridge, some of our meals would likely turn out a bit more basic but we would not starve. I was also not concerned with the navigation station being turned off. Navigation offshore is surprisingly easy and a small hand-held GPS allows plotting the position on a paper chart.

What really worried me was not having an autopilot. With a small and inexperienced crew, I knew we would get exhausted very quickly having to hand-steer the boat. It is tough to drive a boat at night in big seas, and most people tire out in less than an hour on the helm.

Within the next two days, more trouble lay ahead. Two fittings essential to control our main sail broke.

One night, we were hit by a gale-force squall with wind speeds upwards of 70 km/h. Nothing unusual, but more damage occurred to the rig that should not have happened. One of the stays designed to hold up the mast looked more like a spaghetti than taut wire. At this point, I knew it was likely that the entire rig was suspect and we had a long way to go.

Although we travelled 1,800 kilometres, our destination was still more than 3,000 km to the west. Our situation deteriorated every day. Things broke quicker than we could fix them, and a difficult decision had to be taken: Should we continue and hope for the best or steer to the closest port?

In a world where we are accustomed to be connected 24 hours every day of the week with instant access to anything we potentially need, being in the middle of the Atlantic with a damaged boat was not much different than it was before the advent of cellphones, Facebook and Twitter. No coast guard helicopter would be able to reach us.

While for many this is a scary thought, this is part of the fascination of going to sea for me. Being offshore means being self-reliant. We depend on our own skills and make do with what we have on board.

With technical issues compounding, an unfavourable weather outlook, and an inexperienced and tired crew, good seamanship would only allow for one sound decision: Point the boat to the closest safe harbour.

Re-reading my notes I am convinced more than ever that this was the right thing to do. However, out on the ocean, the human factor played as an important role as cold, technical facts — making a challenging situation even more difficult to deal with.

With heavy hearts, we changed course and headed for San Vicente Island, Cape Verdes, just off the African coast near Dakar, Senegal. That did, of course, not end our troubles. The closest port, Mindelo on San Vicente, was still 700 kilometres, or five days of sailing away from us. The strong winds and big waves did not abate, either.

Only hours after setting our course for the African coast, all of a sudden a heavy clonk in the aft cabin startled us. We immediately knew what it was: The rudder. If there could have ever been a doubt before, our decision to head for the closest port was more than confirmed. The boat had some serious

issues and was essentially not ready for offshore sailing despite the assurance from the owner that he had the boat properly prepared.

I did not sleep much that night, losing a rudder can be devastating. An underwater inspection two days later in calmer seas did not reveal any apparent damage. Nevertheless, the clonk intensified to a “ka-boom” over the next two days, making my berth shudder each time the boat rolled in a wave. The mechanics who rebuilt the rudder just before the passage advised us to tie a rope around the rudder to secure it. That did not inspire much confidence, and we simply hoped the steering system would hold together until we made landfall.

While we managed to jury-rig all our broken fittings, changed the alternator on our engine and got all electrical systems running again, the damaged rig and clonking rudder kept me on edge.

Three days later, we finally could make out the windward islands of the Cape Verdes. On radar first, then a mountain appeared through the mist, and soon we entered the port of Mindelo. The boat made fast, I marched straight to the floating sailor bar where I quickly downed a rum, the best rum I ever tasted and well deserved after a painful passage. I relaxed for the first time in over a week and suddenly realized how tired I really was.

After trying to help the owners assess the full extent of the damage and getting repairs underway, there was nothing else I could do but book a flight back to Vancouver.

Another adventure at sea came to an end. This one no doubt being the most difficult to date. Much was learned, and despite it not being much fun while on the boat, I would not want to miss it.

Christof Marti is the owner of Simply Sailing School in Vancouver (simplysailing.ca) and is a director on the Board of BC Sailing. 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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