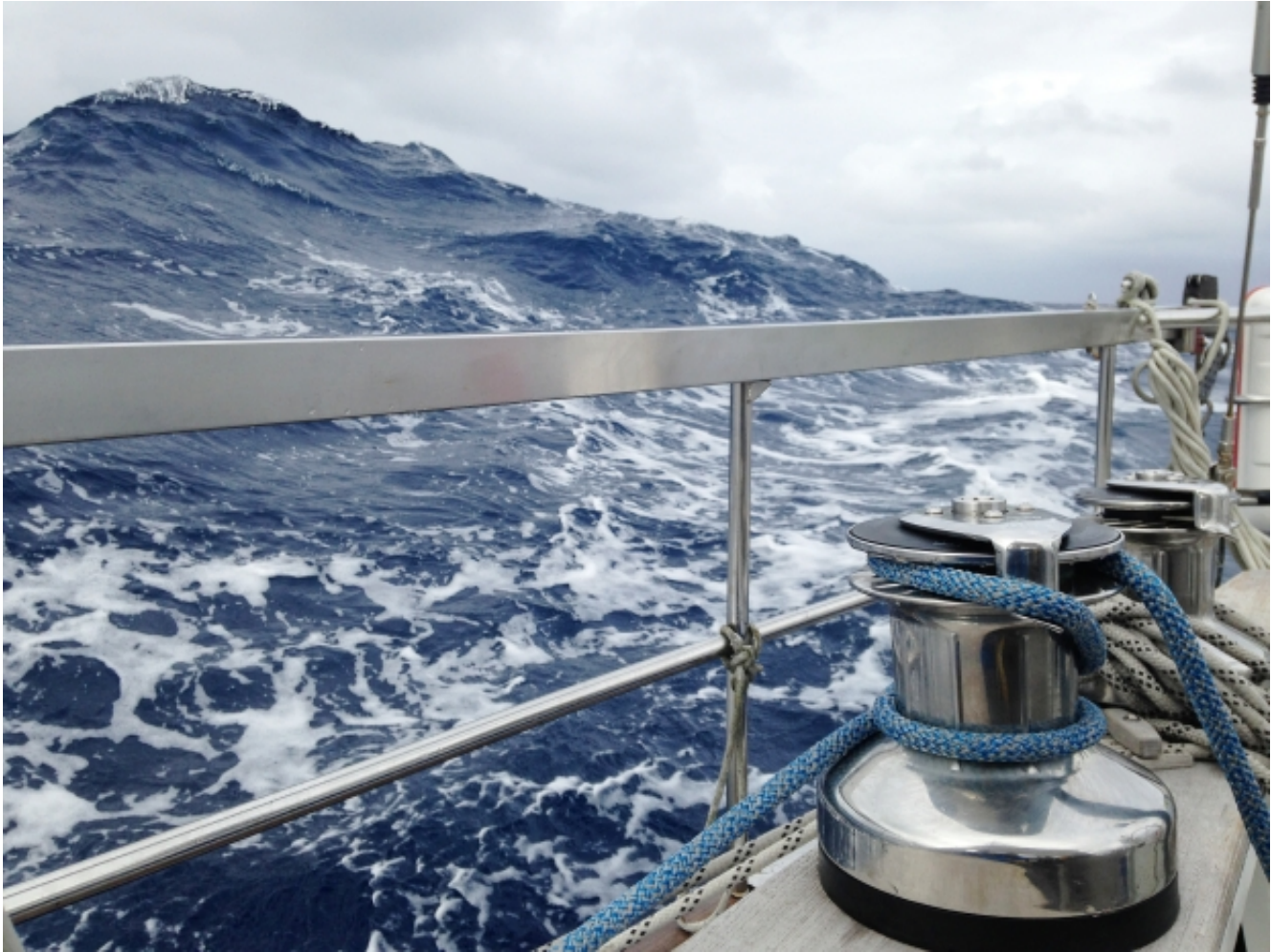


Atlantic crossing to Canary Islands kicks off with gale-force wind

Hair-raising, but sailboat performs beautifully

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



Rough seas greeted the crew on the first leg of their journey. Christof Marti/Special to The Sun

Sailing across oceans, exploring exotic islands and living a life away from the daily grind is the dream of many. A couple who I met through sail training two years ago bought a boat in Europe and got one step closer to this dream.

Over the last year, they meticulously prepared their boat Shanty to get her ready for a delivery across the Atlantic to the Canary Islands.

Last month, the owners and I met in Portimao, a sleepy town in Portugal's Algarve region. The Algarve is famous for its rugged coast and steep cliffs. Wind and waves relentlessly chisel away the sandstone leaving a jagged coastline, towering cliffs and free standing rock formations.

Portimao itself is probably best left out of any travel itinerary. It's a town full of German and English retirees and clearly a victim of the unchecked construction boom in the '80s and '90s. In anticipation of our big adventure, I overlooked the sterile condo developments and unfinished apartment buildings that

were abandoned by their developers years ago during the economic downturn.

The marina, on the other hand, is a new development; full of big, shiny boats. The Shanty was probably one of the smallest boats around, but very seaworthy. We spent the last day checking out the boat thoroughly. Climbing the mast for a last inspection of the rig, checking all engine systems, loading the boat with food, water and diesel; these chores are part of any offshore passage.

We left the marina and headed out into the Gulf of Cádiz. The wind was light, but there was a swell as a result from a low-pressure system farther offshore.

We steered southwest seeking more wind. The line between Cabo San Vicente on the southwest corner of Portugal and Gran Canaria divided the zones of wind and no wind. The problem was that the line between calm and gale force winds was very fine. I have been watching the weather for weeks and there seemed to be pattern of low-pressure systems coming towards Lisbon, generating favourable but strong winds along our path.

The winds picked up to a pleasant breeze during the first night and we turned the boat south towards our destination of Lanzarote in the Canary Islands. To our joy, the cloud cover broke and we sailed under a starlit sky.

As we had some issues with our communication system to get up-to-date weather information, we had a friend giving us updates over a satellite-based text-messaging system. This worked like a charm.

During second day, the wind steadily picked up and eventually reached a full gale.

The waves became quite formidable. I don't dare to estimate their height, but they were bigger than anything I have ever seen. They would heave the boat up and I could look down into a trough so deep our boat all of a sudden felt very small.

Then we dropped into the valley between waves, only to look up at the towering waves capped with foaming white caps. Most waves were not breaking, but some hit us with full force right over the boat, sending a wall of foaming white water over the deck and into the cockpit to drench whoever was at the helm. I was in state of being fascinated and feeling apprehensive.

Wind speeds reached between 60 and 70 km/h, gusting to over 80 km/h. Twice the boat wiped out, tossing everybody from one side of the boat to the other, and my heart jumped. Shanty, however, took it in stride and righted herself. She was built and prepared for this kind of weather and never once did I feel she could not handle a situation.

The biggest issue for me was fatigue. With just over two hours of sleep at night, I started to feel really tired; yet we had to stay alert as there were many cargo boats around us.

On the day we expected the winds to drop, we sailed in gale and near-gale winds day and night. This started to take a toll on the crew and everybody felt exhausted.

Finally, on the third day, the weather improved and we enjoyed beautiful sailing. I sat on the bow sprit,

while Otto (our autopilot) was keeping a steady course. With my feet dangling just inches above the water, dipping into the bow wave every now and then, it was the most peaceful moment on our passage. The two foresails spread like the wings of a butterfly, a steady breeze pushing us towards the Canary Islands and the sun shone high above in the sky.

On Day 4, the sun rose over the horizon and finally: Land ho! The barren peaks of Lanzarote rose over the horizon some 60 kilometres to our west. A dozen or so dolphins appeared and escorted us towards land. They swam in our bow wave and every now and then jumped through the air. Just beneath the surface they appeared like silver arrows darting through the water alongside Shanty.

A beautiful end to our first leg across the Atlantic towards Grenada, just off the coast of Venezuela. You can follow our progress over the next two to three weeks while we make our way toward the Cape Verde Islands to catch the trade winds and onward to the Caribbean [by clicking here](#).

Winds on that second leg, close to 6,000 kilometres long, typically are fair this time of the year and we don't expect too rough seas and hope for some good fishing. Then again, it is the sea and one never knows what she might hold in store.

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