

# A small boat across a wide ocean

ALASTAIR BUCHAN finally achieves his blue water dream, crossing the Atlantic, from Las Palmas to Barbados, in his Hurley 20, via the Cape Verde Islands

In the run-up to Christmas, Las Palmas becomes a favourite watering hole for Atlantic travellers. Vessels of all shapes, sizes and nationalities arrive from Europe and the Mediterranean. The air is heavy with views and news on crossing the Atlantic.

To novices like me, the number of

boats is staggering. By the end of November, some 200 boats had left with the ARC (Atlantic Rally for Cruisers). As many again were preparing to leave. Fresh arrivals, renewing old and making new friendships, more than balanced the daily departures. There was even an association for non-ARC boats – NARC for short. It had its own flag and its only rule was that you made your own as you went along. The pontoon gurus did their sums and announced that this season some 2,000 boats were crossing the Atlantic. It was going to be a busy ocean.

Ready to go, I was keeping myself busy with small, unnecessary last-minute tasks in a feeble effort to delay the inevitable when Bill from *Aloisius* dropped by. 'You don't have an SSB receiver.' It was a statement, not a question.

'Take this.' Brushing aside my protests, he handed over an expensive and suspiciously new-looking portable SSB receiver, together with a list of radio schedules.

It was a kind, generous gesture, typical of pontoon life. There was a strong sense of comradeship and a sense of being part of a mountain base camp preparing for a summit attempt or of a colourful gypsy encampment.

But, amongst its other characteristics, the pontoon was a rumour factory

where whispers, especially horror stories, were quickly carved in stone and passed from boat to boat. The real surprise was not the number of boats crossing, but that any sailed at all.

I was going to sail south-west until I met the Trades and then turn right for Barbados, a total of some 3,000 miles. It was the classic route, but I prudently noted the Cape Verde Islands as a bolt-hole. I had no intentions of stopping *en route*, but when plans fall apart it looks better to proceed in accordance with alternative arrangements than to appear as if you are fleeing in flight.

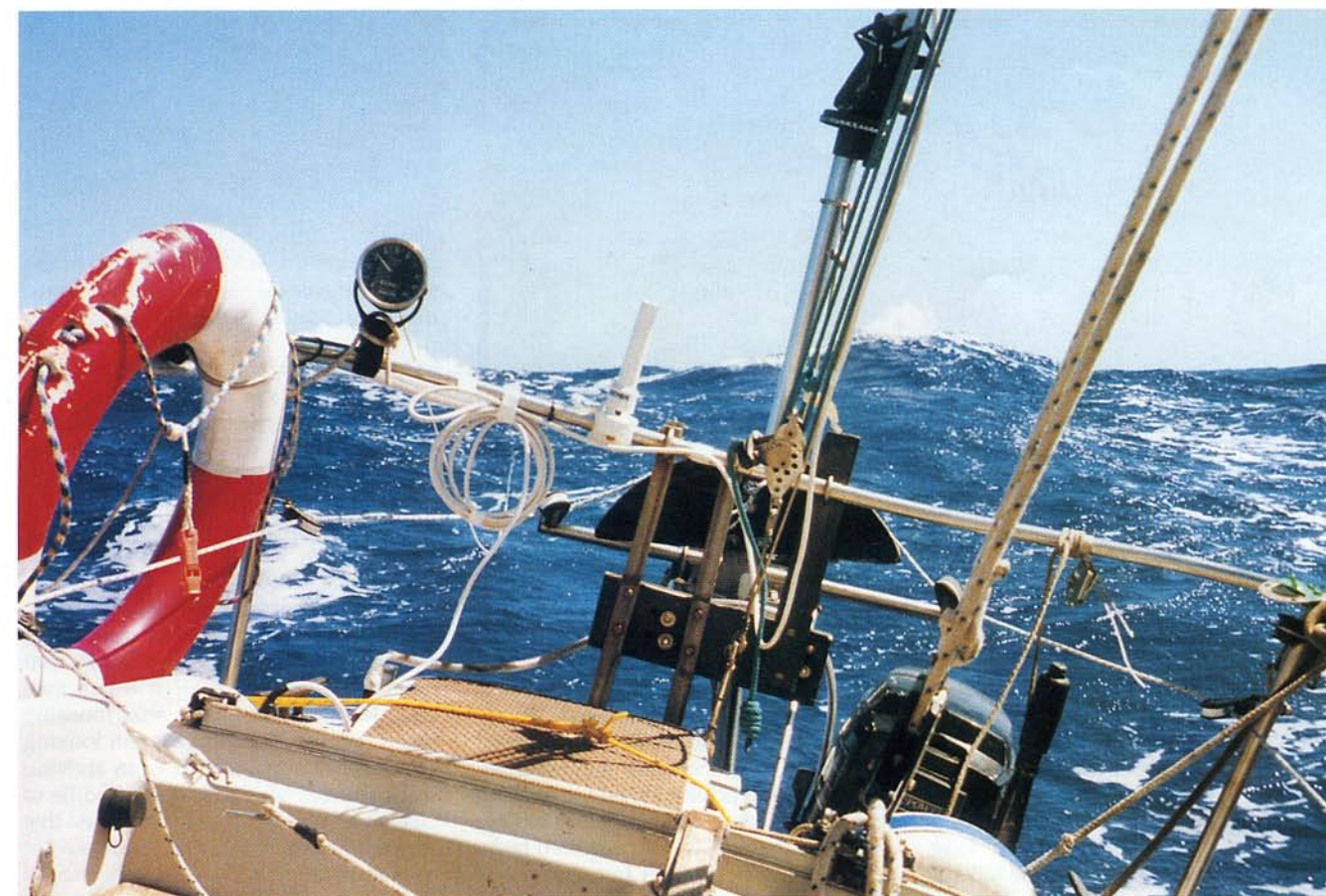
Since leaving Falmouth, a figure of 80 miles a day had worked well when route planning, but the promised combination of favourable winds and currents proved too tempting. It would be downhill sailing. *Mintaka* would romp along. Throw in a few free miles from the current and I would have 100 miles a day and more. I calculated 30 days to Barbados and dreamt of twenty-five, but to be safe I would allow thirty-five.

I was ignoring the teachings of Cowards Anonymous. Instead of avoiding doom by anticipating disaster, I was planning for the best and assuming all would go according to plan. More to the point, I was overlooking the Horse Latitudes.

The Trades may be found as far north as Madeira, but in the winter they follow the sun south and the space they once occupied is leased to light, variable winds that call themselves the Horse Latitudes. Some years they can reach hundreds of miles south of the Canaries. In the old days they would see salty, shellbacked skippers throwing horses overboard when passages grew long, and water and fodder ran short. A week out of Las Palmas I began to believe that it would be quicker on horseback.

Days and nights were spent becalmed or chasing zephyrs with a useful working life of minutes. Once, for variety, the barometer dropped twelve points in 24 hours. The received wisdom is that a fall of five points below the seasonal average comes with a lifetime, copper-bottomed, gold-plated promise of a full-grown, genuine tropical revolving storm. It is unusual for these to be part of the Christmas festivities, but bad fairies and bad pennies can turn up when least expected. It would be an understatement to describe my reaction as helpless terror.

Apart from checking stowage arrangements and having a meal, there was little to do but wait. Any half-respectable tropical revolving storm should form up west of my position and then shoot off towards America. I was already jilling south and moving



Above: running down the classic trade wind route

towards its safe sector. Hopefully I would only ever touch its fringes. That was the theory, but theories exist to be disproved, so I was relieved to meet nothing worse than two days of southwesterly Force 5-6.

Even so, it was on the limits of *Mintaka's* windward performance, and a troubled sea expressing its frustrations by striking out violently in all directions did not help. Violent squalls took advantage of the confusion to launch frequent sneak attacks. The force of their blows laid *Mintaka* over and the torrential rain that came with them closed down visibility and hammered the sea until it took on the flat, grey, burnished sheen of dirty, mottled pewter. It was an impressive performance.

It is usual to describe waves breaking at sea as 'snarling' or 'roaring', but from close observation I can reveal that their snarls and roars are the contented purring of a well-fed kitten. The true breaking wave comes straight at you, like a jet fighter making a low pass after-burners on overtime. Its thunderous rage fills the world with the promise of absolute power, and when the black of the night merges with the dark of the



Left: the author's faithful pocket cruiser, *Mintaka*, sailed 2,000 miles in 21½ days

vessels in marinas on Gran Canaria were damaged. For me, it was two days of unalloyed, damp discomfort and misery followed by blue skies and calm.

Before I left Las Palmas, the word was that small, isolated cumulus looking like the outpourings of a steam engine are a sure sign of the Trades. For days I was surrounded by Puffing Billy clouds out of *Thomas the Tank Engine* without a breath of wind in sight. If a wind did appear, it was from the south. It was so perverse, I came to believe that the Trades were a myth. They had been privatised, franchised, downsized, nationalised. Whatever the cause, the Trades were not. The temptation to flash up the engine was almost irresistible. But to what end? I had fuel for about 100 miles. No distance at all, and afterwards I would be out of fuel and probably still in the same weather pattern. No, we were making slow progress and at some stage the weather had to improve.

I finally met the Trades just south of 20°N. At first they were so shy that I was worried that my presence would scare them away. Very quietly I raised the spinnaker as a sign of my good intentions and kept it flying for the next

sea, the sound is one of life's eye-opening, mouth-drying, heart-stopping experiences. Then it hits you.

Long afterwards, in Barbados, I learned that I was not singled out for the meteorologist's revenge. I had escaped lightly. Others had suffered far worse. A German yacht on passage between the Canaries and the Cape Verdes (it must have been quite close to me) was caught in a Force 9; another yacht coming down from Lisbon caught a full gale, and

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21 hours, until the wind had gained sufficient confidence to blow *Mintaka* along under the more traditional rig of boomed-out jibs.

I took stock. Twelve days of calms and headwinds were making for a long drawn-out trip. I ought to let the folks at home know that I would be delayed. I looked around for the nearest telephone and, in accordance with previous arrangements, made for the Cape Verdes and the island of São Vicente. It was three days before I arrived.

Despite their years as a Portuguese possession, the Cape Verdes are culturally as well as geographically closer to Africa than to Europe. Unknown and unspoiled by tourism, they are well worth a visit. Mindelo, Conrad could have used the name, is São Vicente's only town and the archipelago's second largest. It is home to 50,000 people and sprawls around the north end of Porto Grande, the deep bay that provides a splendid, natural anchorage for visiting yachts. Its only drawbacks are the squalls dropping down from the surrounding hills and the crowd of boatboys offering to watch your dinghy, fetch water, fuel and shop every time you go ashore. It is off-putting, but it is the only living they have and they work hard for whatever you pay them.

Hopes of restocking on fresh food

were dashed by a large notice at the entrance to the market. As far as I could make out, it warned of the existence of cholera and advised washing all fruit and vegetables in bleach before eating. I decided that this was an acquired taste. There is a supermarket but, compared to Las Palmas, it is pricey and its stock limited.

When the Trades blow across the Cape Verdes, they are squeezed down the channel between São Vicente and the neighbouring island of San Antao. This speeds them up and their accompanying swell steepens and ricochets between the islands, creating a large, lumpy, disgruntled sea, while the sand carried by the wind from Africa reduces visibility to a handful of miles.

I learned this at first hand as I left the shelter of Porto Grande. It nearly destroyed my newly-refreshed morale. Being covered in sand and rattled around for a month or more held little attraction, but second thoughts were academic. Like a small child going down a helter-skelter, there was no going back. I was totally committed and decision making was easy. I closed my eyes, hung on and went.

In the Trades, sea state is more important to comfort than wind strength. It could and did blow from a Force 2 to a Force 6 in the time it took to make a cup of coffee, but as long as the seas remained regular, life was fine, even if the walls of water coming up astern bore a strong resemblance to the North Face of the Eiger, complete with snowfields and avalanches.

Problems, and discomfort, came from seas that ran across the grain. They always produced horrendous rolling but, given the slightest

Alastair Buchan pictured on arrival in Carlisle Bay, Barbados



Sipping a sundowner in the Caribbean beats Hartlepool Marina on a wet Wednesday

encouragement, they would slap *Mintaka* so hard that she would snap her sails loudly in fright, dig her stern in and spin round in a flurry of spray. Once this went on for thirty-six disheartening hours. A fair balance was maintained by days and nights of easy rolling seas and sailing down the glitter of moonshine under a star-filled sky.

I celebrated passing the half-way mark. For the first time, *Mintaka* and I had sailed 1,000 miles non-stop. Surely that deserved a glass or two? It was a mistake. Reaction set in the next morning when dawn revealed the ocean looking the same as ever and, far from arriving somewhere, I was still in the middle of nowhere. A look at the chart showed that the nearest land was Brazil. I had no plans to visit Brazil, but I began wondering if it would be quicker and then sail north.

## The true breaking waves come straight at you, like a jet fighter making a low pass, afterburners on overtime

There is a similar feeling in long-distance running. It is called the wall. The only remedy is to keep moving and shove the wall aside until you can squeeze through on to the yellow brick road beyond. Disappointment lasted all day. Towards evening I threw the fishing line out in the hope of fish for tea, but when I hauled it in, my favourite lure and some feet of line had vanished. This was no bad thing. Sharing the cockpit with any fish capable of snapping a line with a 60 lb breaking strain would have been an interesting challenge. It certainly would have been upset and it is a moot point who would have had the first bite. I had to smile. Life was back to normal.

Flying fish need no invitation to leap aboard. Most mornings saw one or two on deck. They are curious creatures. They pop out of a wave and, with translucent wings extended and sparkling in the sun, soar across the sea. Taking advantage of every eddy in the wind, they rise and fall with the waves for a respectable 30-40m (98ft-131ft), before making a splash landing. Sometimes they fly solo, sometimes in squadrons. For the first half of the trip Madeiran Terns skimmed the waves,

and all the way across the aristocratic Bosunbird would circle around looking down its beak at *Mintaka* as though unsure at what it saw sailing on its ocean. Apart from one container ship that passed five or six miles away, that was the total company for the passage. I read a lot and listened to the radio.

Once clear of the Cape Verdes, sail handling rarely rose above deciding on one jib or two. Invariably I got it wrong. I would fly both and cower in terror as we raced along in a near-continuous surf. This produced the best day's run of 115 miles, but if I took one sail down, then within minutes we would be barely moving.

I controlled the sailplan by rolling up the furling headsail. I could do this from the security of the mainhatch and leave the pole in place for when I grew brave enough to unroll it again.

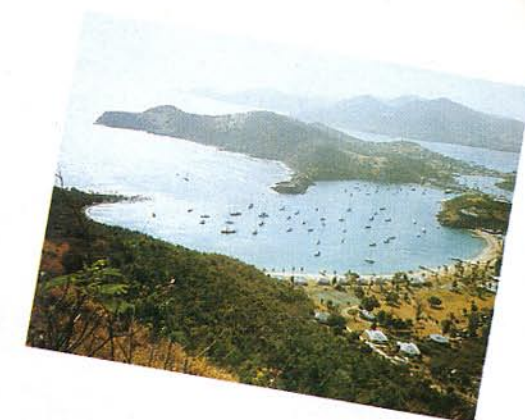
One night, as we rushed along under a poled-out flying jib, the control lines for the Navik chafed through and we lurched and staggered over the ocean. Before I could safely hang over the stern to replace the lines, the jib and its pole had to come down. I took one look at the pitching foredeck and decided to wait for dawn. It was the first time I had steered since leaving Mindelo, and it is untrue that dawn comes quickly in the tropics.

After 19 days, reading material was running thin and I was keen for a change in my diet of BBC World Service. A hunt through the medium waveband brought in the Voice of Barbados Radio. It was firm evidence that I was somewhere close. Since the water was holding up well, I filled the solar shower and had a bath.

Land always pops up when your back is turned. Two days later, as I settled down for afternoon tea in the cockpit, there it was, a whale-like hump breaking the horizon. Night fell and the island became a jewel flecked with pinpoints of light topped by the flashing fireflies of aircraft landing and taking off at the airport on the south of the island.

Needham Point marks the entrance to Carlisle Bay, in the south-west corner of Barbados. Once it was safely astern, I handed the sails. We motored the last few cables through the darkness into the anchorage until the sound of surf breaking on the invisible beach cracked my nerve and I threw the anchor overboard. The Trades pushed us back. We stopped.

In 21½ days we had sailed 2,000 miles. For the last 14 days we had averaged 100 miles a day. I looked around identifying familiar yachts. There were only two questions. Where was the bar and when was happy hour? □



The famous postcard view of English Harbour, Antigua, from Shirley Heights

Alastair Buchan (51) completed his Atlantic circuit in July, sailing home to Cornwall from St Maarten via the Azores. The intrepid yachtsman, who retired early to make his blue water dream come true is hoping to write a book a his Atlantic adventures to inspire other small sailors. Buchan, a native of Gateshead, has been sailing since he was a boy and believes that, with thorough preparations, a well-constructed small yacht can sail anywhere larger yachts may venture



After the dash across the Atlantic, the reward of reaching blue water paradise