

Casting off the lines and going with the flow.

by Chris N Jones *Commodore*

I was scrabbling around in the loft recently wondering where and how to get rid of years of clutter when I came across my old RYA Cruising Proficiency log-book. The first entry, and my first adventure slightly offshore in a cruising boat, was noted on June 13th 1980. Boat was a Contessa 32, aptly named “Chaos” and we were delivering her to Barmouth from Cowes for the start of the Three Peaks Race and that’s where my transition from dinghies to offshore sailing began. My first memorable impression on board was one of fear at the thought of not only sailing out of sight of land, but also doing it at night. This was followed by curiosity as to what lay behind the constant commotion that appeared to be going on deck as I tried to enjoy my first ‘3 hours off,’ chaos indeed.

115,000 nautical miles and 40 years later I have much to reflect upon. Remember that iconic, slightly patronizing but charming response from Indiana Jones to his girl friend,



‘It’s not the years honey, it’s the mileage.’ Well actually I tend to think it’s both and, although the precise numbers are fairly inconsequential, the passage of time combined with mileage certainly does add depth. What stands out in this chaotic jumble of memory are the one or two factor x moments which redefine or reshape every thing that comes after and prove to be unfathomably significant milestones in life.

The next twenty years were rich with the best of sailing experiences - happily gained on other people’s boats. In June 1989 I joined Mike De Petrovsky on his Arpege 29 to compete in the two handed Observer Round Britain and Ireland Race, alongside such iconic names as Knox Johnson, Chay Blyth and Pete Goss. Unsurprisingly the Race was quite a challenge with a mixture of storms, fog and calms resulting in only 47 of the 60 starters actually crossing the finish line. The last week of the Race was dominated by a strong high pressure cell and consequent light winds. I remember the frustration of spending most of one night short tacking close inshore against the flood tide trying to use the night breeze to round St Catherine’s point on the Isle of Wight. The winning boat, a 50’ trimaran aptly named Saab Turbo, finished in a corrected time of 7 days 7 hours and 30 minutes.

Our much more realistic 21 days 10 hours 54 minutes may have placed us a solid last, but we were more than happy to have accomplished the time in a 29' boat. Later a combined vote from all the other competitors not only awarded us the Henri Lloyd Trophy for Endeavour but also convinced me that the horizon only exists to be extended.

In late June 1993 another opportunity arose when I met the Australian owner of the 36' steel ketch the 'Lord Fred' who was looking for crew to sail to Greenland. This introduced a whole new dimension - ice. Our landfall was to be Angmassilik on the east coast of Greenland which only becomes ice free between August and early October, not that we planned that long a stay.

Having spent some time waiting around in Reykjavik for the right moment, we finally had the all clear to go from a commercial airline pilot, who'd recently flown across and noted that the ice was breaking up. Setting off from Iceland on the 400nm crossing of the Davis Strait was an even more dramatic factor x moment - the leaving of the comfort zone and staying that way for over a month. Sure enough 50nm off the coast the first ice appeared along with it's normal companion - fog.



Not only that but the East Greenland current increases in speed considerably near to the coast and we suddenly found ourselves in shifting fog, ferry gliding in a four knot tidal flow in 5/10 ice looking for an obscure sheltered anchorage which refused to appear. Heart beat off the scale. Thankfully a local Inuit spotted our dilemma and came out in his dory and guided us to safely.



The following month was interesting to say the least, thankfully we had 6 crew on board which allowed us to have three on watch and three off down below warming up. On deck we had a driver, a bow man with a long pole and a spotter on the spreaders.

Amazingly it worked and we managed to make our way through fog, ice and bad weather for 580 nm around the tip of Greenland through Prins Christiansund to Nanortalik and then another 800 miles across to St Johns in Newfoundland. The story of this journey is a book in itself but the outstanding memory for me was the value of sailing with a crew selflessly prepared to mind each others' backs regardless of the conditions and of course the desirability of, not only of going with the flow, but watching out for, and avoiding, any less than welcome companions. Another lesson for life in general perhaps.



In 1999 Fi and I bought our own boat in Florida and the time had come to put all previous experience to the test. Although my accumulated mileage at the time was approaching 15,000 nm, it had all be under the watchful eye of more experienced skippers and crew. Not only was it now my turn to carry the can but my first passage was to be the 4300nm journey from West Palm Beach Florida to Y Felinheli. On June 1st, as we motored down the Pierce Inlet out from the Intracoastal Waterway into an uncomfortable chop with nothing but the Atlantic Ocean between us and home, the feeling of apprehension among the four of us on board was tangible to say the least.

The land quickly fell astern and as darkness closed in we were enveloped by the vastness of the ocean. The factor x moment that I now reflect upon was not perhaps the expected one of continuing fear and apprehension but rather the opposite. A sense of calm descended as all the complexity of life ashore disappeared and was replaced by a sense of determination and a strange simple conviction that all would be well regardless of the challenges ahead. Naïve,



possibly, but as the days passed senses became sharper and our minds and bodies adapted to the rhythm of a boat in harmony with the ocean. I now recognise this as the breaking of that bond with the need for certainty and predictability that we all naturally cling to and which can shape so many of our life decisions, and replacing it with something much more fundamental. We had cast off the lines and decided to go with the flow or in other words committed ourselves completely to the start of a real life adventure.

We shaped a course to pass 120 miles north of Bermuda planning to pick up a prevailing westerly airflow around 30 degrees north. This turned out to be something of a miscalculation but was nevertheless just one more significant step on what has turned out to be a continual and much appreciated learning curve. Having spent so much time living next to and on the Menai Strait, and always taking advantage of a favourable flow to pass through the Swellies or round South Stack, I now wonder what we were doing ignoring the benefit of the north going 4 knot Gulf Stream which could have knocked a significant

time off our overall passage. Well the answer of course comes back to that risk associated with the unknown - if in doubt don't.



We have subsequently always planned to go with the flow around headlands such as Cape York and Puysegur point or used it to pass through narrow rock strewn channels like French Pass, Hole in the Wall or the Cook Strait and even ridden the notorious Agulhas Current around South Africa's Cape of Good Hope. But hindsight is a wonderful thing and, while fortune favours the brave, one false move when holding a tiger by the tail can end in tears - and strong winds over a prevailing current in an ocean setting can make a rough South Stack look like a bad day on a paddling pool. So now I tend to adopt the 'if in doubt there must be some potentially serious consequences afoot, so steady as she goes' approach.



As our journey progressed, so our awareness of the powerful conflicting forces that govern our fragile planet became more apparent. The mid latitude convergence zone north of Bermuda where warm tropical air and the cold polar flow meet, lay ahead like a black impenetrable wall illuminated by a million volts - and we had to get through it. We quickly found that four people trying to hide in the toilet is not a practical solution to any problem however scary - and this was very scary. Lightning bolts hit the water all around us, the air fizzed with ozone and coloured lights flickered around the stern. Some hours later we emerged from torrential rain unscathed into a dawn promising clear sunshine.

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The wind filled in from the west and we sailed on for several days with the whole show still in full performance day and night some 20 miles or so to the south. Suddenly we understood, we had sailed through the violent, forever shifting nursery of all Welsh weather, where ocean and sky meet, conflicted in a complex battle to achieve a state of harmony that could only ever be satisfied if the earth stopped rotating - never going to happen, hopefully.



Days turned into weeks as our trusty ship sailed on through sunny days and star lit nights over an ocean of translucent azure blue. We were at peace and completely content living 24 hour days travelling ever on at 5 - 6 knots towards our distant home. We fought strong winds and counter currents which reduced our progress to a mere 60 miles in 24 hours.



We observed the sea change from blue to grey and the water temperature dropping from 70F to 56F as we hit fog 100nm south of the Grand Banks on the north slope of the Gulf Stream. We saw current separation lines 500 miles from land, back eddies and surface swirls just like those in the Swellies but where rocks were replaced by whales and dolphins. We ate, slept, read books, changed sails, fished without success, witnessed sunrises and sunsets and ran over a drifting fishing net at four in the morning - all part of the real life adventure deal.

On June 30th we'd crossed on to the continental shelf and glimpsed the Fastnet light at dawn. Four days later we turned the corner at Bardsey and were soon anchored off the C'bar to wait for a favourable tide. Job done after thirty three days at sea. Contrary to what might have been expected, an atmosphere of subdued apprehension tinged with regret was clearly evident on board. The fact was that no one wanted to get off and we would all have happily carried on south to who knows where. This phenomenon has become well known among long distance sailors and really underpins the profound impact that living on, or just even having access to a boat, can have on peoples' lives to differing degrees. It may just be the opportunity to get away from it all and spend some time in a marina and doing some close coastal sailing to a quiet anchorage, or it can result in a life changing opportunity and the fulfilment of unimaginable dreams.



All are equally valid. We just have to cast off the lines and remember to go with the flow but beware, factor x awaits and, if you so choose, you might just wake up one morning in another world with the magic sound of the ocean flowing past the hull as you extend your own distant horizons on passage to who knows where.