

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

Some voyages are easier than others.
Jenevora Swann narrates a challenging
Sail Across the South Atlantic from Cape
Town, South Africa to Brazil





When our friends asked if we'd help them sail *Tourterelles*, their brand-new Knysna 500SE catamaran on her maiden voyage across the Atlantic from South Africa, we jumped at it. We'd sold our own catamaran a year previously in Australia and were missing the cruising lifestyle and the challenge of sailing into pastures new.

The trip was also the perfect opportunity for Fergus, my husband, to complete the practical part of his RYA Yachtmaster Ocean qualification. He'd already passed the theory, but the final requirement was to do a passage of a minimum of 600nm, using the ancient art of astro-navigation. Sailing as part of the crew, instead of his usual position of skipper, meant he could complete this task without monitoring the GPS.

Having never been to Cape Town before, we were delighted the boat was moored in the popular V&A Waterfront Marina. Its central location gave us the opportunity to visit a few tourist attractions including the iconic Table Mountain and the penguin colony at Boulders Beach.

The marina is home to a sizeable selection of seals, sealions and a rather large Cape otter who, as

we discovered, has the tendency to board boats at night, seeking out any items of food that may have been left unattended!

Our plan was to head across the South Atlantic, aiming for the Caribbean, via the two remote tropical islands of St Helena, and Fernando de Noronha – an archipelago off the northeast coast of Brazil.

We couldn't rely on the ports we were visiting to have much fresh produce, so we provisioned with seven weeks' worth of food. Luckily, this beautiful and spacious catamaran is fully equipped with two very good freezers, large fridge, integrated cockpit cooler box, and extensive space for tins, dried foods, UHT milk and cartons of juices.

Departing Cape Town

Finding the right weather to leave Cape Town proved a challenge. We hoped for light winds for a few days to get offshore, then we could seek out the trade winds, once clear of the land. Finally, after a week of waiting, the GFS/ECMWF forecasts showed a brief, but favourable, window.

Casting off from the dock, we navigated our way through two lifting bridges and left Cape Town. With 11kts of wind from the north, we hoisted the mainsail and genoa and sailed out past

ABOVE
Tourterelles in V&A Waterfront Marina, Cape Town

BELOW LEFT
Sea lions are regular visitors in Cape Town

BELOW RIGHT
View from Table Mountain, Cape Town

PREVIOUS PAGE
Fernando de Noronha

Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela was once imprisoned.

When the wind decreased, the Code G sail was put into action and, running at 6-7kts with calm seas and under sail, we were all happy as we settled into our first night on the 1,700nm sail to St Helena.

With four of us on board, our night shift patterns were very civilised, especially as we were sharing them per couple. On the leg to St Helena, Fergus and I were doing the 'sunset' shift of 8pm to 2am, while Ian and Ann had the 'sunrise' shift from 2am to 8am.

Swells and sails

While we started in the planned light airs, the breeze filled in more than expected, building to 20kts from south-southeast. Under the main and genoa, we sailed well at an average of 6.7kts with one reef in the main.

Then, without warning, the light sea state changed and became rather confused. With a 2.5m swell at an eight second interval on the beam, it became incredibly uncomfortable. Thankfully, the confused sea state didn't last too long and after a few days it settled down and the wind all but disappeared.

At the start of our second week at sea, we finally had the wind behind us and it was perfect conditions to





drop the mainsail and get the Oxley Bora winged sail out to play with.

This gorgeous sail was like nothing we've sailed with before. Cut like a symmetrical spinnaker, it had a wing-shaped kite that is self-inflating. Flying high above the bow of the boat, the sail seemed to dance from side-to-side in the breeze, moving us along so quietly, it felt like we were floating above the ocean.

Seeing stars

Sailing offshore, hundreds of miles away from land and civilisation, isn't for everyone. You can go for days without seeing another vessel on the chart plotter and it doesn't take much to realise you're on a very small boat in a very large ocean. While this can be scary for some, we find offshore sailing really peaceful and relish the serenity and change of pace.

Being on night watch adds another element to the tranquillity. With a night sky clear of cloud and no moon to take centre stage, the stars and constellations come out to play, carpeting the sky in bright dots, sparkles and different shades of white.

Fergus' newly acquired skills in astro-navigation came into its own. He had an amazing grasp of the night sky, pointing out the brightly lit planets of Mars, Neptune, Jupiter and Uranus – as well as detailing

ABOVE RIGHT
Confused seas

ABOVE
Departing Cape Town

BELOW LEFT
View from Table Mountain, Cape Town

BELOW MIDDLE
Enjoying one of the many walks around the island of St Helena

BELOW RIGHT
Jonathan the 191-year-old tortoise who lives at the Governor's Residence

many of the 88 constellations.

We also had our fair share of shooting stars that zipped around the stratosphere as if on an Formula 1 race track. But our highlight was seeing the occasional meteor streak across the sky; each visible for three or four seconds before disappearing. This is when sailing offshore at night can be simply magical.

St Helena

After 12 days at sea, from 27nm out we could see the mountainous landscape of St Helena looming on the horizon. Situated almost halfway between South Africa and Brazil, it's one of the most remote islands in the world.

Steeped in history, it's Britain's second oldest Overseas Territory, after Bermuda. It was once an important port of call for ships sailing to Asia and Southern Africa from Europe and it's also where Emperor Napoléon Bonaparte was exiled to in 1815, until his death in 1821.

The island was a joy to discover. Walking around the capital of Jamestown was like stepping back in time to an old Cornish village, with its Georgian architecture, typically English street signs and currency, which is pounds sterling.

On a guided tour around the island, we met Jonathan, a 191-year-old

tortoise, who is the oldest-known living land animal in the world. We also snorkelled with whale sharks, who can be seen in St Helena's waters for three months of the year.

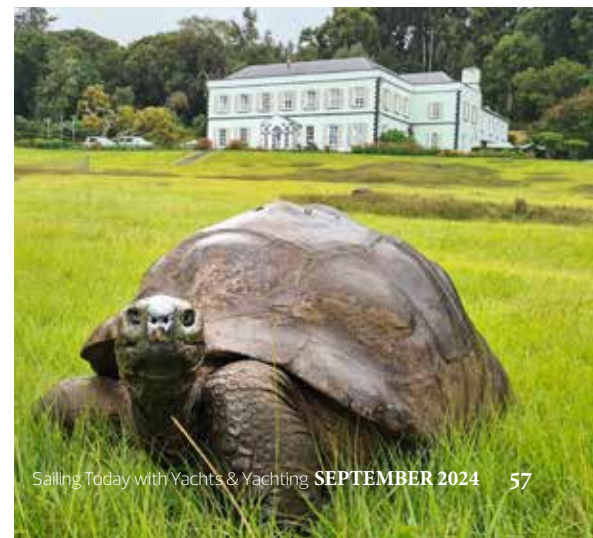
But it was the topography of the island that surprised us the most. From a craggy black volcanic exterior, to an interior beautifully full of colourful flowers and a lush green landscape of trees, flax and grazing animals. It's well worth a stopover if sailing this route across the South Atlantic.

Dramatic times

Our visit was curtailed as a large swell was heading towards St Helena, resulting from a storm thousands of miles away, off the east coast of Canada. The harbourmaster advised the anchorage would be uncomfortable and landing at the dock untenable. So we checked out and set off on the 1,733nm trip to Fernando de Noronha in Brazil.

Little did we know we were about to face a journey of extraordinary challenges and drama.

Heading northwest, it wasn't long before we experienced large swells and fickle winds. During the first day, we went through a series of sail changes before settling on the Oxley Bora winged sail. Adding persistent rain and a broken impellor into the mix, it wasn't the best of starts. →



Cruising – South Atlantic



We settled into a rhythm, with the Oxley sail flying well in winds of 15-22kts, giving us an average boat speed of 6.2kts. Shortly after sunrise on day three, a 27kt gust of wind hit the sail hard.

As the boat slid down a wave in the heavy swell – now at 2.7m – the autopilot dropped out, causing everyone to be up on deck very quickly to rescue the sail and steer the boat back on course.

It was a fight to get the Oxley down as halfway through snuffing it, another large gust caught it, refilling the sail and taking the sock back to the top. As the sock line pulled through Fergus' hands, he got a nasty rope burn as, in the urgency of the situation, he'd forgotten to don his sailing gloves.

Persevering and in pain, he eventually managed to snuff the sail, but spent the rest of the morning with his hand immersed in a bucket of ice to quell the effects of the throbbing rope burn.

After a few hours of light winds and slower speeds using the genoa, the Oxley was hoisted once more. Sadly the weather gods hadn't finished having their fun with us yet and we were subjected to a second large cloud, that crept up behind the boat in stealth mode, bringing 25-34kts of wind.

Ian, our skipper, didn't want to risk damaging the Oxley by getting it down in such gusty winds, so started the engines and motored forward to reduce the apparent wind on the sail.

With the uncertainty of the situation and the speed – which topped out at 15.6kts – compounded by the roaring noise of the wind, I was momentarily terrified. It didn't help that the boat was

rolling in the swell and there were some very large waves roaring up at the back of the boat.

A plan was formed to put the genoa out to blanket the Oxley Bora, which could then be wrestled down, this time by Ian as Fergus was operating with only one hand. Thankfully, within seconds of the sail being snuffed, the dramatic situation ceased; leaving us all in an exhausted, windswept heap for the second time that day.

That was enough to put the Oxley sail away for a while, as the winds were just too unpredictable. So, we ran downwind with just the genoa out, then added a reefed main on a wing-on-wing basis.

Extraordinary challenges

A week into the second leg, another much more challenging day loomed.

Shortly after breakfast, the autopilot malfunctioned, this time, switching off completely. Fergus was by the helm so put the boat onto hand steer while we got the sails down. It was difficult to fathom out why it had malfunctioned, but Ian had fitted the boat with a second autopilot, which was put into play.

ABOVE
Atlantic spotted dolphins

ABOVE LEFT
Huge swells behind the boat

BELOW LEFT & RIGHT
Jenevora and Fergus taking turns at hand steering

We settled back into the day, and were rewarded by a large pod of Atlantic spotted dolphins that swam along in front of the boat, happy to escort us for part of the way in this great big ocean.

But our joy didn't last long. At sunset, just as we were making a sail change, the boat's second autopilot stopped working. With two autopilots malfunctioning in one day, there was clearly something badly wrong and we were 800nm away from land.

Ian and Fergus went through all the normal diagnostics to try to resolve the issue, but as darkness loomed, we were left with no alternative but to hand steer the boat all night, taking turns on a rota basis.

The next day, we checked all possible causes, trying to understand whether the autopilot fault was electrical, hydraulic, operating system, or just a loose connection. The boat was brand-new, so to have an issue affecting two autopilots was extraordinary.

Chains of communications commenced with marine engineers, the manufacturers of the boat and of the autopilot. We also received





email help on troubleshooting from family and friends as well as from another yacht – and fellow Ocean Cruising Club member – who was sailing nearby. He had a Starlink connection delivering high-speed internet in the middle of the Atlantic and offered to watch some technical YouTube videos in case he could find a fix. His kindness and support meant a huge amount.

We were now faced with our worse-case scenario – to hand steer the remainder of the way to the island of Fernando de Noronha. Between us, hand steering for six days would be doable, but tiring, especially in the heavy swells.

Digging deep

At 36-hours into the issue we were very tired and incredibly frustrated, but not beaten. This leg had become a marathon and we were having to dig deep to keep focused, while getting used to a new gruelling shift pattern.

Each couple did a four-hour helming stint at night as well as individual watches during the day. Taking time out to sleep or rest in between watches became imperative.

During a spell of calm weather, we launched the Oxley Bora, but it quickly came down when we spotted a small tear on it, probably sustained from its earlier exploits. So we sailed with the two headsails up – the genoa and the Code G – trying to keep a speed up of 5kts.

When we made landfall in Fernando de Noronha, it was a huge relief. It had been one of the most frustrating and stressful trips we'd ever had.

Beautiful island

In between trying repairs and fixes, we got to explore a little of Fernando de Noronha. At seven square miles, it's the largest of 21 volcanic islands and islets that are situated 220nm off Brazil's northeast coast. Because of its beaches, diving and surfing, it's very popular with the Brazilian jet set.

We wished we could stay longer, however, it was also one of the most expensive islands we've ever anchored at, costing £65 a day.

Frustratingly, we couldn't fix the boat's issues, so instead of hand-steering 2,000nm to Tobago, the skipper decided we would go

ABOVE
Tourterelles anchored in Fernando de Noronha

ABOVE LEFT
The beach at the anchorage in Fernando de Noronha

BELOW
Jenevora and Fergus on *Tourterelles*

BELOW LEFT
Ann, Fergus, Ian and Jenevora chilling out in Fernando de Noronha

Jenevora Swann and her husband Fergus Dunipace were liveaboards on their catamaran *Two Drifters* for eight years. They sailed halfway around the world from Greece to Australia before pausing their circumnavigation in 2022. [Facebook.com/TwoDriftersTravel](https://www.facebook.com/TwoDriftersTravel), [twodrifterstravel.com](https://www.twodrifterstravel.com)

238nm in the opposite direction to the Brazilian mainland port of Cabedelo. With engineers and parts more readily available, the boat would rest up at Marina Jacare Village until it was ocean ready again.

But we end this tough journey with a smile. En route into Cabedelo, Fergus and I were just finishing our final night watch, when there was a strange wet slapping noise, quickly followed by Fergus yelping and jumping up. By our feet there was a surprisingly large flying fish, which had flown into the helm station and walloped him in the face, leaving a slimy trail of scales from his cheek to ear.

We're well-versed to flying fish landing on the boat, but this was the first time of being hit by one. Perhaps it was Neptune's way of just touching base!

Tourterelles

Knysna 500SE
Catamaran
Owners Version (2022)
LOA: 15.2m (50ft)
Beam: 7.95m (26ft)
Draught: 1.40m (4.6ft)

