

# Sailing my 323 alone across the Atlantic

By Matt Rutherford

[The boat is a 1983 P-323 hull # 384 with a Volvo MD-11d.

Matt has done extensive rebuilding on the boat. (Ed)]

Before leaving on this voyage, people would ask me three questions that I seemed to hear over and over again. The question I heard the most was, "Aren't you afraid?" It was hard to answer because "no" just didn't seem like much of an explanation.

Shortly before departure, I read a story about Augusto Cesar Sandino who led a suicide charge against a US Marine base in Central America in the early 1930s in an attempt to crush the American Imperialist aggression within his homeland. He, too, was asked the question of fear. He answered, "We are all the masters of our own fear." That became my answer and will forever be.

In close second was, "Why don't you take a plane?" This was even harder to explain. First off, to me, there is nothing spiritual about getting on a plane. There is something about turning off your engine: harnessing your propulsion from the wind, your power from the sun (solar panels), and your steering from a combination of water pressure and wind fluctuation (wind vane). I often felt as if I was crossing the ocean on the breath of Mother Nature.

Thirdly, "How can you sail a boat by yourself?" Well, I'm living proof it can be done, but it is very difficult. The boat becomes an extension of your mind and body. All preparations prior to a voyage must be scrupulously complete. Being comfortable with your environment is the key. My 32 foot sailboat, The Ault, took three years to make ready.

The trip started off with calm winds for the first week. Often I would sit there bobbing around with no air in my sails waiting for the slightest breeze. For seven out of the first ten days, I sailed through thick fog. Often, especially off Nova Scotia, fishing boats came so close that I not only heard the engine, but I also heard conversations of the unseen crew. That can play havoc on one's nerves: sailing along, hoping there is nothing in front of you -- feeling blind folded. Due to a big drain on my boat's available power reserves, I had limited use of radar. In such dense fog, danger stretched on forever in the mists.

Off Sable Island: tropical storm Cristobal roared blasting towards me with sustained wind speed of 60kts (65 miles an hour). The storm was at 42 north 63 west; I was at 42 north 59 west. I headed southeast under both full sail and motor, hoping it would stay on the projected northeast course. I soon learned that I had less than 15 hours to sail clear of Cristobal's eye. This storm, just one mile per hour short of hurricane status, was huge.

Although I had achieved some distance from the storm's center, the wind picked up with gusts of 40-45kts and higher. I had thought the wind would be a bit lighter, and I was surprised when I got down to my third reef point (as small as the main sail will get) and a scrap of jib. The Ault was traveling too fast in high waves--still hitting 7kts. Even worse, I was close hauled, beating into the wind and waves, still trying to get distance from the center of Cristobal. Again and again, my small vessel came flying off one wave only to hit the next dead on. The noises were deafening: like someone positioned beneath my boat--hitting it with a sledge hammer. The whole boat would shudder from stem to stern. In order to stabilize her, I deployed my drogue--a small parachute that is deployed off the back of the boat. That made all the difference in the world. It kept her from flying off of waves, and it calmed the boat's motion. (I would highly suggest that anyone who sails offshore include one. The drogue is a godsend.)

Once I had shortened my sails and deployed my drogue, there little else to do except change out of my wet clothes and hunker down for the duration of the storm. I spent the next 24+ hours lounging around in a pair of shorts, eating peanuts, and reading about the Sandinistas' revolution in Nicaragua. At times, I

almost forgot that 20 ft plus waves were passing under me. Waves crashed down on my cabin top, simultaneously cascading water down over every window, and covered the entire boat in a thick watery blanket. When Cristobal died down, I was well beat up and bruised in many places. There was nothing left to do except toast Poseidon with a shot of whisky for a job well done.

Cristobal had blown me several hundred miles off course. The wind died after the storm passed, so it took me five days to get back on course.

Once I arrived off of Newfoundland, I was faced with a stark reality: it was the end of July, and I was still 1500 miles from Iceland, my planned destination. Due to weather patterns in the North Atlantic, I needed to arrive at Iceland by July 31st. I had plans to visit friends there, but I could not remain in Iceland long or September's storms would threaten life and limb. An initial departure delay of two weeks combined with hurricanes Bertha and Cristobal dashed my plans for Iceland. Reluctantly, I changed my course to the UK and felt some level of defeat. My original goal for the last three years had been to cross the Atlantic Ocean, however, the exact route was somewhat an afterthought.

Each night, for the first week out of the Newfoundland area, birds gathered around my boat. The first night, there was just a few. Every night, more would show up, until I had hundreds of little friends. They did not want food. I tried to feed them, but they were not interested. They did not want a place to land either; they just liked to use my boat as some sort of hang out spot. The talkative birds were very welcome visitors and would stay with me all night circling The Ault.

One thing I didn't realize is that the great circle route--the northern nonstop east coast to UK route -- is a highway for low pressure systems which equals storms/gales. During the final 17 days of my Atlantic crossing, I was in seven gales: three force 7 gales of 35 kts, two force 8 of 40kts, and one force 9 of 45 kts. Gales can rage for two days, and by the time one was leaving, another lashed right behind. One of the gales, the force 9, lasted over 70 hours. I was down to a storm jib and a third reef point for 60 hours and deployed the drogue again for 20 hours. That gale kicked up larger waves than Cristobal because it lasted so long. It produced waves around 35 feet, waves the size of a house. I am glad it didn't blow any stronger than 45 kts. It might have gotten a bit sketchy. So that was the way it carried on--one storm followed another.

When I first encountered this series of gales, they were a welcome change of pace to the average 15-20kts days. After dealing with them over and over again, they become quite a nuisance. I had to change out of my dry inside clothes and put on my wet outside clothes every time I went topside. There was so much rain and moisture that nothing dried inside the boat. Black mold attacked my wet clothes and foul weather gear; there wasn't anything I could do about it at the time. When I arrived in Falmouth, England, they said that this was the stormiest, wettest summer in 100 years. All this bad weather hit The Ault before it hit England.

My last night at sea, while entering the rocky English Channel, I saw a lunar eclipse. There the cosmos further solidified my bond between the sky and sea--sky and sea being the only two things that I had seen for over a month. I was starting to feel as if land had ceased to exist--as if, like Columbus, I was destined to sail until I fell off the edge of the earth. When the first lighthouse beamed powerfully through the night, I yelled, "LAND HO!!!!!! FINALLY LAND!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

Although I was happy knowing that I would soon have cold beer and fresh food, a larger part of me was sad knowing my great adventure was coming to an end. Over the next months, I will visit several countries: a three day sail here and a five day sail there. It will not compare to the overwhelming sense of freedom which is found deep within the vast open ocean.

The final tally: it took 33 days and 20 hours to travel from Kiddy, Maine, to Falmouth, England. I sailed 3,468 nautical miles nonstop.

I will miss the seemingly endless horizon that had been my home for 33+ days. You only get one chance at life. You might as well make the most of it. You only get one ticket so enjoy the ride. We are all capable of so much but we often do so little. Ride life till the wheels fall off.

After 34 days alone at sea, it took a little time to adjust to Falmouth, England. Falmouth is quite a popular place in England, and people are everywhere. I stayed there about a week hanging out and getting a break. In England, they drink warm flat beer, almost hard to imagine. My uncle, Jim, flew in for a few days, and we sailed to an Island chain in the Atlantic called the Scillys (a distance of 150 miles). For a man from the desert, Jim performed well as crew. After Jim left for Phoenix, I sailed to Ireland.

Well, I wish it was as easy as it sounds. The UK Coast Guard went on strike; this meant that they suspended weather forecasts by radio. It's a 300 mile trip to Ireland crossing the notorious Celtic. I ventured out blindly into the English Channel, but was soon hit by force 8 gale headwinds. The winds forced me to retreat upriver among rocky shoals for two days to wait it out on anchor.

Then, five days later, I pushed on to Lands End-gaining a mere fifty miles over my start from Falmouth, went ashore and found a lone red, phone both located truly at the land's end. Because the weather reports still were unavailable, I called my mom at her school and she found much needed storm information on the internet. I headed into a small fishing harbor barely twenty minutes before a force 9 storm blew in.

A few days later, when the storm subsided, I sailed off to SW Ireland. It was a rather uneventful crossing. After 65 hours I pulled into Sneem Ireland (county Kerry). I came to Sneem to visit local legend and traditional storyteller, Batt Burns, and his wife Mora. They kindly put me up in their house and got me on the local news. I stayed with them three times that month.

Southwest Ireland's coast has dramatic cliffs hundreds of feet tall rising straight out of the water. These cause strong tides which are made dangerous by sharp rocks hiding below the surface. These hazards make vigilantly navigating a primary and constant focus. Storms that have cross over from Canada come crashing into west and southwest Ireland. If you pay attention, you can avoid most of them. I spent about a week over a period of a month sitting on anchor in random ports, rivers, and harbors throughout SW Ireland.

After I sailed the Ring of Kerry, my Dad and sister came and visited me. We did not sail much together, but we did rent a car and drive all around the country. It's a certain fact: Guinness tastes better in Dublin. After they departed home, I sailed to southern Ireland and waited a three days of good forecasted weather to proceed back across the Celtic sea to England.

On the sail back to England, I saw the strangest thing one night: a nearly full moon that illuminated an approaching rain squall system headed my way. I saw a rainbow in the middle of the night!

When I pulled into port at Falmouth, I could instantly tell that a lot had changed there since six weeks earlier when I first arrived. The days started getting shorter and colder. The local tourists were gone along with most of the boats in the anchorage.

The weather was starting in deteriorate. I needed to make for my final port some 600 miles away past, the English Channel and the North Sea. I left Falmouth and headed across the channel to France. With the exception of watching out for the heavy freighter traffic, it was a good trip to Cherbourg.

I thought that my ability to speak French was adequate, but I soon learned that I couldn't communicate effectively. One day I was walking to a bank. There was a big protest street march going on. They were marching the way I needed to go, so I started walking with them. Some guy said something I didn't

understand, handed me a giant sign, and walked off. So now I'm walking down the street with this big sign, people are screaming stuff, and blowing whistles. I really wished I could have read the sign because I have no idea what they were protesting. In France a bottle of Paddy, great Irish whiskey, is only 13 Euro. I had a good time.

I then sailed back across the English Channel to Dover in SE England. There, at the straits of Dover, the current runs five knots. You have to plan your entrance to the North Sea according to the tide. My trip across the North Sea was one of the most miserable trips I have ever done. It was the end of October, and it was very cold and wet. I was beating into 30kts of wind and sleet for 150 miles. The freighter traffic was the worst I have ever seen. The cool part about this trip was that the voices on my radio in a matter of 24 hours went from English to French to Belgian to Dutch. Finally, I reached the IJmuiden River, and I made it to Holland. After a few hours cruise down a canal, I arrived in Amsterdam. I will keep the boat in Amsterdam over the winter, go back to the states for a few months and work to earn money for next year's sailing.

Tomorrow I fly back. I immediately board a 50ft boat in NC and sail it to the Virgin Islands; then fly back to Annapolis, MD, and deliver another 50 footer to the Bahamas. I still have another month at sea ahead of me. At least this time I'll be getting paid. By the end of this year, I will have sailed over 10,000 miles with around 5,500 of those miles alone. Next year, should I go north to Norway or south to Africa? Decision, decisions.

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