

Across the Atlantic in a Seabreeze

"Well, how was it?" people ask.

As if a month at sea, 3,500 nautical miles in a 35-foot sailboat, can be answered with a sound bite.

I grab my chart of the North Atlantic, creased along the East Coast, and holding my thumb and index finger two inches apart to show the space that my boat averaged every 24 hours. Then, I unfold the map, four big sections, with its wobbly, penciled line nearly five feet across.

"It's a long damn way."

The Atlantic, I'm here to tell you, is still as wide as when Columbus crossed it. His trip took about a month, too, 30 days of good and bad sailing, boat and crew problems, curses, prayers and celebration. The big differences: we knew our position (plus or minus 15 feet) and we had ways of calling for help. Still, when you're out there, plotting on that big wide chart, blank except for 2,000-fathom depth marks, there's something ancient about the challenge.

It's so big you focus on your little universe, the cockpit, your bunk, a plate of food. Three hours on deck, and six off. My two crewmen read, ate and slept across. Me, I worried the whole damn way. What was that noise? Is there enough fuel? What has the voltage dropped to? I slept no more than 90 minutes at a time.

"Any big storms?" is the invariable follow-up.

Just a gale, I answer almost apologetically. A day out of Bermuda, with 40 knot winds with gusts to 47. An agonizing buildup all day, 20-23-27-30, the high wind warning beeping until I read the manual to turn it off, then three hours when the seas looked like Himalayas of moving chiseled flint. Then, at sunset, water so flat we had to motor.

We had four days in the middle with no wind, days of brisk beam-reaching when the staysail billowed beautifully, hours of wind from every point of sail that shook out and used every reef in our entire suit, and a week, the last week, that was just miserable, eight days and nights of beating into 12-foot waves with 25-knot winds. The worst day was a backward slash on the chart two days from Europe when we tacked to avoid undersea mountains and made 2 miles west for 3 miles north. By then, when the wind dropped to 20 knots, it felt almost calm and I was ready for Portugal.

We arrived after dark on July 1, met by a dozen colleagues at the dock, and my mate, Trish O'Kane, with roses and champagne. It was a sweet. A month later, I'm still sore in places.

In the Beginning

But the endurance needed to cross the Atlantic is tested long before fenders are stowed, I found. It takes its toll on relationships, pocketbooks and self confidence. I'll never forget asking the guru of Seabreeze boats what he thought of crossing the Atlantic in a 1970 shoal-draft, stepped-mast, centerboard fiberglass boat.

"It's been done," came his doubter's reply.

I plowed on with a five-figure refit, only to have my first mate (and chief shipwright) quit the very hour we were to leave the dock.

"This boat isn't ready," he yelled. "I have a bad feeling about it."

I didn't. By then I'd replaced or refurbished every major system, from centerboard to Windex. All new sails and running rigging. New chain plates and electrical system, each new light with a dedicated wire leading to a new distribution panel. We left with several things hanging, like the fridge and bright work and a decent paint job. But all safety systems required by common sense or the Atlantic Rally for Cruisers (including 40 flares, two manual bilge pumps, double lifelines, three man-overboard systems with hydrostatic lights), were installed.

It was a terrible, tense rush to get it all done by May 9, when the rally left St. Augustine. We had no time to test systems or even raise the new sails. I threaded reef points as we went. "We" being a crew of two men I didn't know from Adam.

"Why not wait another year?" the ex-first mate asked.

It was an awful question. Blind ambition or pursuit of a dream? Putting it off would have been easy. But I couldn't shake the feeling that a window was open and might not be another year. So many gifts were letting it happen: A Seabreezer loaned his \$4,000 life raft, a colleague his \$1,000 EPIRB. I had guys who worked three weeks for nothing on the most onerous of jobs to get the boat ready. They were dreaming with me, and I didn't know how to pay them back except to sail.

Enough psychobabble. At the start I was exhausted and choked with tears to think that it really was going to happen.

What worked

Single best investment: Autohelm Sailpilot 5000, a below-deck autopilot that attached directly to the rudderpost. It sailed Ranger to Europe. I'm selling my Monitor wind vane.

Next best: Force 10 propane stove with oven. A 10-pound tank fed three men three times a day for 16 days (the longest leg). Nothing like a hot meal or a cup of cocoa when things are shitty. Even canned chicken tastes good heated with mashed potatoes and gravy.

Things I'm glad I took along: A \$1,000 radar mounted on a swing near the hatch. When that first tanker light appears on the horizon, our 16-mile range helped track the beast.

And, extra fuel in jugs. We motored 160 hours between Bermuda and the Azores, using more than 70 gallons.

Having listed those "gadgets", I remember that a transatlantic is to a sailboat what Indy 500 is to race cars – a test of every system. Basics count. When 40-knot winds threw gobs of water that struck like ball-peen hammers, I was glad for new Lexan sealed well. After a week (24/7) of rolled-up or reefed sails, I couldn't thank the sail makers enough. In a roller coaster sea, I was so glad I had ripped out and acid-cleaned the fuel tanks.

What didn't work

Mounting electrical busses flat with covers. One particular cold front drenched us so that water pooled around the terminals. In Bermuda, I remounted them upside down.

Caulking. Water gets in EVERYWHERE, seeping, dripping, gushing. Warning buzzers went off from shorts across the terminals. Hydrostatic strobes went off after big wet waves. An expensive but cheaply made Linc 10 fried like bacon. They don't belong at sea. (FYI, every boat in our fleet complained of water eventually)

Centerboard. You know the debate, whether shoal-drafts are safe at sea. Properly trimmed, the Seabreeze hull floated and swam like cormorant in every kind of sea. In big and breaking water, it tended to slide off the tops of waves, although heeling sometimes exceeded 35 degrees. But the aluminum centerboard was a problem. While useful in reducing weather helm in flat seas, it was a nightmare with any kind of pitching or rolling, or even gentle running. Even cranked tight, the banging inside the trunk was frightening and sleep-depriving.

What I liked best:

The art and science of making her go. Performance without stress. I learned that Ranger talked to me, often waking me up, squirming, tugging, when she was unhappy, out of sync. I'd come topside, look and feel and adjust the helm or sails, sometimes only a matter of inches, and she would get into a groove.

And, the dolphins! Hundreds of them at times in the Sargasso Sea. The coolest sight was at night when they shot past the boat and touched off phosphorescent life forms, creating glowing wakes in the water. I can see why, after days of tension, sailors embrace cosmic signs like dolphins, rainbows and shooting stars. I did.

Now what

Ranger is on the hard in Lagos, Portugal, the village from which Prince Henry set out to explore the Atlantic. Next spring, and over the coming years, between books, I plan to return to sail and motor along the Spanish, French and Italian coasts, and spend a season in downtown Paris. I have no desire to sail back home, or go to weather in 25-knots. If asked why I did it, I usually say, "To get to the other side." But, of course, there was more at play. You'll have to read the book...