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TRANSATLANTIC CROSSING

Photographs and Words by Arielle Pytka

Last January, I was asked to join a team of six sailors participating in a race across the Atlantic Ocean. The vessel was a 56-foot Bestevaer aluminum sailboat. We took off from Gran Canaria in the Canary Islands and set our course

for Saint Lucia in the Caribbean. Over 21 days, we sailed more than 3,000 miles of open ocean. We endured gale-force winds with towering waves and being stuck in the doldrums for days in the blistering heat. We kept watch for four-hour >



shifts, in teams of two—looking for tankers, tracking the weather, trimming the sails, keeping an hourly log with our coordinates and instrument readings. Night watches were one of the most memorable experiences one can have on a boat: the number of shooting stars becomes comical; you lose count. During the day, we saw innumerable pods of dolphins, a couple of whales, gargantuan patches of sargasso weed and some magnificent sea birds. We were fortunate to get a mid-ocean swim—something all sailors dream of but is difficult to achieve if the conditions aren't just right. We also passed the time listening to music, singing karaoke, and writing poetry, while I was assigned to prepare meals for the always-appreciative crew.

Of course, it wasn't all smooth sailing. We encountered some serious failures in a few of the boat's critical systems, including the extremely precious water maker, generator and engine. Crew personalities clashed over everything from what course to take to what music to play (and how loud). Being on a boat that is constantly in motion and often tacking steeply to one side—let alone being tossed about by frigid waves—is taxing: your muscles are always engaged, either trying to stay balanced or finding a stationary position to eat or sleep. After several weeks, sleep deprivation impacts your overall well-being, requiring patience with one another. Refilling everyone's canteen unprompted became an unspoken kind gesture.

And yet, there's nowhere else any of us would rather have been. Our skilled captain and engineer got us to Saint Lucia intact, with no serious injuries or damage to the boat. Nothing compares to being on the open ocean for long passages, in complete harmony with nature, the weather dictating everything from the boat's speed to everyone's mood. Using nothing but the wind and currents to propel yourself from one continent to another is the most rewarding of feelings. The inner peace that comes from having no distractions is something I won't forget, nor the gratitude upon returning to terra firma. Until I can chase that horizon again, its endless liquid landscapes will linger in my imagination.



