

There are significant benefits for berth holders based in Rubicon Marina in Lanzarote. The wonderful restaurants, bars, swimming pools and local beaches, repair facilities, not to mention proximity of the extensive sailing grounds around the Canary Islands; all of which encouraged me to extend my stay for a further year. Adventures have included several cruises with friends, including members of the ICC Choryna Kiely, Andrew Collins and David Lawlor. So rather than recounting a simple narrative of those adventures for this year's log, I thought I would focus on a single context, the dubious pleasures of sailing alone.

Standing on the shoulders of giants

I have always been drawn to those logs of single-handed sailors, often related in ICC annuals; the understated narrative of Sam Davis's passage in *Suvretta* from the South Sea Islands to Howth Yacht Club, via Cape Horn; the quiet determination and courage demonstrated by Robert Henshall on *Maria* when his mast broke on his passage home from Portimão to Ireland, via the Azores; Brian Law's participation in the AZAB in his 77-year old 28', Gaff rig yacht *Redwing*; not to forget the many varied trips of our former Commodore, Cormac McHenry, culminating in his single-handed Atlantic circuit. Of those offshore sailors, it was only Cormac that I knew personally, both of us being members of the National Yacht Club, and he being my sponsor for membership of the ICC. So his single-handed voyages were of particular interest, and inspiration, to me. I have always been curious as to what the attraction is.

The distinguished solo sailor Sir Alec Rose, who famously circumnavigated the globe in his small ketch *Lively lady*, a year after Sir Francis Chichester, sought to address the question 'why alone?' in his autobiography, 'I suppose one must be basically of a certain type; a sort of "dark horse", if you like; a thinker; a dreamer; an idealist; an individualist. A man prepared to stand or fall by his own decisions.' I questioned whether that is necessarily the case today, especially when you consider the wide range of technical tools available to all sailors, in particular solo sailors. His answer I consider to be more 'of his time'. The advance of technology must make the experience significantly different nowadays, arguably easier. The gender dichotomy is also very much 'of its time'.

So, as Jeremy Clarkson might put it 'in order to find out for myself, I undertook three trips over the course of the last year, forsaking all company, except my own. Here I must emphasize, in the strongest of terms, these short trips do in no way reflect the extensive voyages of those narratives mentioned above. Like John the Baptist, I am 'hardly fit to tie their shoelaces'.

Going Solo

Frank Cassidy



THE FINGAL CUP

AWARDED ENTIRELY AT THE ADJUDICATOR'S OWN DISCRETION FOR THE LOG WHICH APPEALED TO HIM MOST

Madeira in the distance

Graciosa

The first, described in my last log, was a simple circumnavigation of the island of Lanzarote, enjoying a day at anchor at the beautiful Playa Francesa on the island of Graciosa, followed by a trip to the marina at Arrecife and finally home via Playa de Papagayo, a shade under 100M. All sorts of small things went wrong, sometimes requiring a certain ingenuity to solve. It was easier than I had anticipated, in particular as I did not sail at night.

Tenerife and Fuerteventura

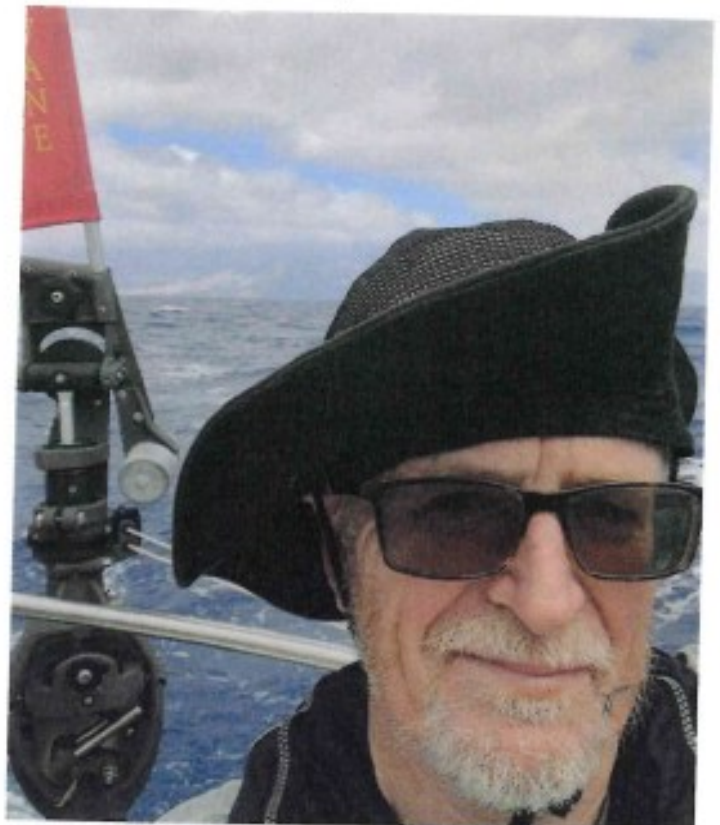
Emboldened by this trip I decided to venture further afield, hoping to explore some of the other Canary Islands. So one evening in November, I slipped lines in the marina, motored out to the anchorage in Playa Blanca and bedded down for the night. Sunrise found me up and about early, sipping a cup of tea and a bowl of porridge, en route to Santa Cruz in Tenerife, 130 miles away. Once passed the southwest point of the island, I began to feel the warm northeasterly Portuguese trades, facilitating a gentle beam reach in 14kts of breeze and a slight swell. Ruby, the hydrovane, was guiding the boat beautifully. Despite a drop in the wind in early afternoon,



Leaving Madeira

requiring the use of the engine for an hour, everything went perfectly until sunset, when everything went to pot. It became pitch black, no moon; the wind changed in direction and strength and I couldn't get the sails balanced, Ruby refused to steer and even the electric autohelm refused to work. I could not see anything except the navigation lights of large cargo ships in the distance, none of which were now being seen or identified on the AIS. I was back to basics, a luminous hand bearing compass, binoculars, old fashioned navigation lights and compliance with international collision regulations. I switched on the engine and altered course to starboard to avoid one cargo ship coming directly amid-ships. I must admit I was little disconcerted, and disappointed in the AIS.

Eventually a waning moon appeared, allowing me to see and balance the sails better, so Ruby started to behave. By this point, the sailing conditions had settled into a rather beautiful 18kts broad reach, so I so slowly regained my composure. That being said, the profusion and speed of the cargo ships around me, and the fact that I couldn't identify them on the AIS, limited my sleep cycles to about 10-15 minutes.



Unexpectedly, I emerged at around 0900 reasonably refreshed, dropped anchor and breakfasted 10M north of Santa Cruz. It was an unprepossessing and uncomfortable anchorage, so the afternoon found me comfortably berthed in Santa Cruz, a wonderful town where I stayed a couple of days.

Obtaining visitor berths can be quite difficult in this area, as I found when I sought to make a booking in San Sebastián de la Gomera. I must admit I wasn't too upset by their refusal as I wasn't relishing the challenge of the forecasted wind acceleration zones en route. I headed instead for Morro Jable, on the southwest corner of Fuerteventura, enjoying the challenge of sailing *Ocean Blue* as high and fast as possible in the fitful northeasterlies along the north coast of Gran Canaria, Ruby being given a rest for the afternoon.



Dodging cargo ships at night

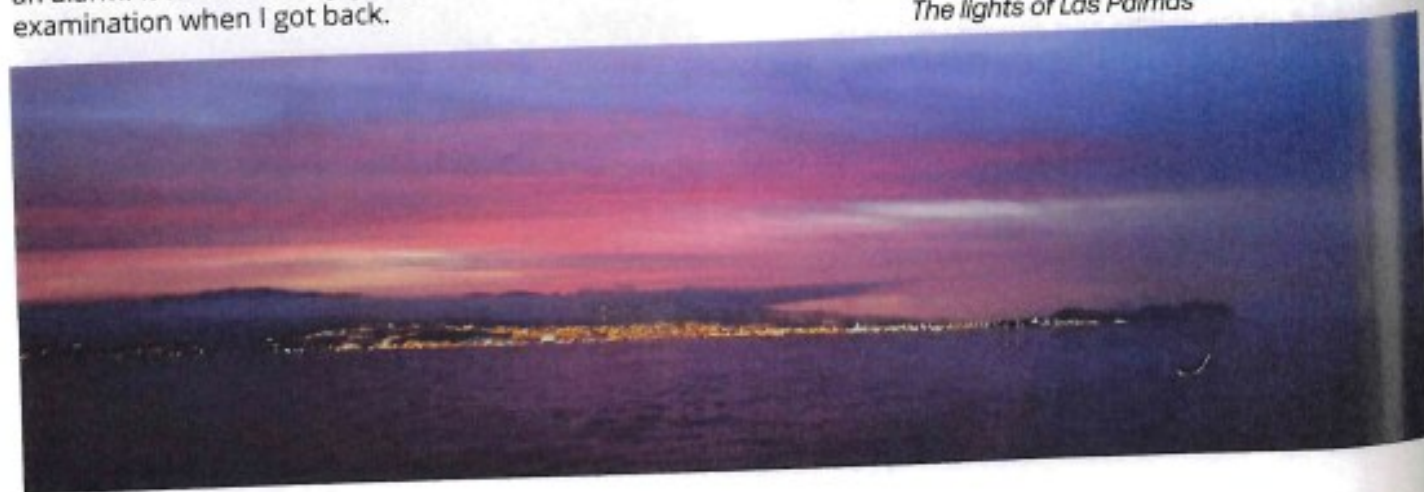
As darkness fell we passed close to Las Palmas, a busy shipping port, and headed towards the traffic separation zone (TSZ) between the two islands. Large ships abounded. As expected, the AIS flattered to deceive, being quite selective as to the ships it identified, and when. I was in for a difficult night. My course, directly from the northeastern point of Gran Canaria to the southwestern point of Fuerteventura, brought me through the gap in the TSZ which allowed ships to either join, leave or cross the channel. The wind picked up a little allowing for a fast beam reach between the islands, the boat behaving herself impeccably as if aware I had other things with which to contend. It was old-fashioned navigation, simply identifying and following the navigation lights, and relatively straightforward. However, having slowed before entering into the second, north going, shipping lane to let all ships go through, two lights appeared way to the south, followed by another two. Initially I wasn't particularly worried as, while I was required to hold my course, I was crossing diagonally at close to 7.5kts and they were a long way off. What I wasn't aware of was quite how fast the two ships were approaching. As you will see from the attached marine traffic photo (note I passed in front of them), they came quite close, one was within 3M of me, travelling at 22 kts, before the AIS registered an alarm. It was definitely going to get a technical examination when I got back.

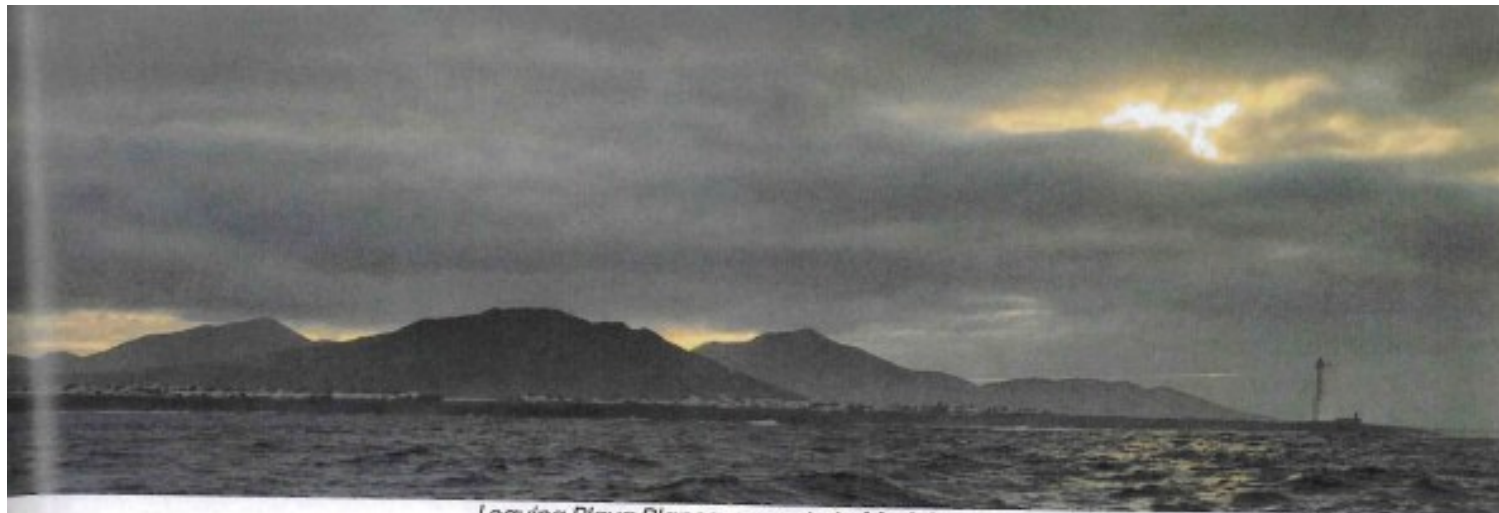
Even after passing through the shipping lanes, the number of ferries and cargo ships rounding the south of Fuerteventura heading for Las Palmas, and vice versa, made it difficult to leave the cockpit, and accordingly I made no attempt to sleep that night. Around 0500 I approached Morro Jable and crept in carefully as I closed on the beach in the dark until I found a spot between two silent yachts in about 7m, when I dropped anchor. I waited until dawn to ensure no dangers and promptly went to sleep. Despite the distractions, it really had been a wonderful sail, with a perfect warm breeze and enough light from the moon to see the background of the island as I approached.

Laziness

All reports of Morro Jable recommend a visit, and here was I on an anchored yacht, a panoramic view of a beach to starboard and high cliffs to port, debating whether to inflate the dinghy. Laziness won out, I had everything I needed on board. I watched the sunset to the strains of Ennio Morricone, a nice meal of pan fried sea bass and buttered spuds, washed down to a Cuba Libre (OK, ice would have been nice).

The lights of Las Palmas





Leaving Playa Blanca, en route to Madeira.

The following morning I was up with the dawn hoping to catch a promised and unseasonable light southeasterly, bound for Gran Tarajal on the west coast of Fuerteventura. That southeasterly never arrived, however a more seasonable light north/northwesterly made for a lazy close-hauled passage, where the GGR sailor Pat Lawless grabbed my lines on arrival. A retired deep sea fisherman from Kerry, Pat competed in the 2022 GGR, holding position in the top four until having to retire at Cape Town with autohelm problems. He is entered in the 2026 race. Following a very sociable interlude with Pat and his wife, Rita, I headed home along the east coast of Fuerteventura, much of it under motor, happily concluding with a fresh blast across the Estrecho de La Bocayna. All in all a most enjoyable passage of around 300M, and I was learning.

Madeira

Even though these two passages were completed solo, much of it was within easy reach of rescue and each individual passage no longer than 24 hours. I hankered for a deep sea passage. The Azores might be a little too far at this point but Madeira and back, a 600M round trip well into the Atlantic, seemed perfect. A new antenna was installed at the top of the mast which seemed to bring a significant improvement to the AIS reception. The new sails were bent on and a shakedown trip to La Gomera and back was completed. By late August all the family had flown home, I had the boat to myself and time on my hands; and no excuses. Yet I was apprehensive.

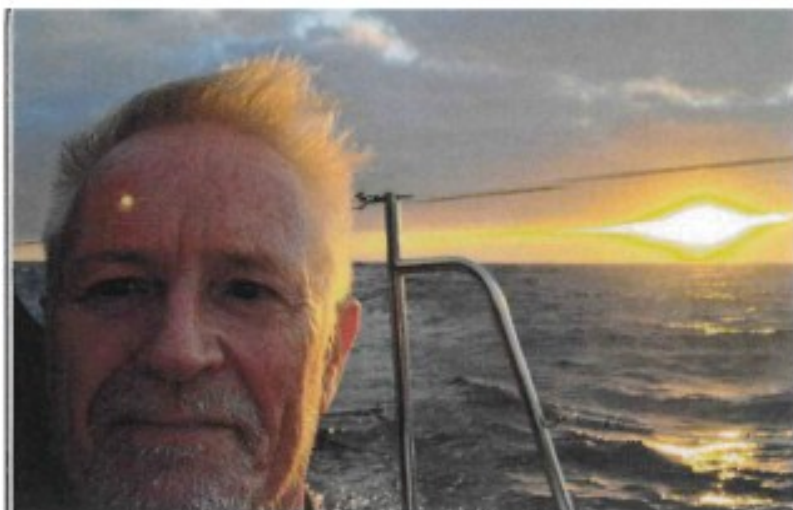
Declan and Philip, two Irish sailors with boats based in Rubicon, helped me slip lines at 0630 in the morning and I headed out to sea, almost in a daze. The wind forecast was a reasonable F5-6, with a significant easterly component allowing for a course to be made on a fine reach, 10° off close-hauled. Some element of the storm that was battering Ireland at the time, Erin, promised a strong swell, something that was evident as I rounded the point and headed northwest, destination Funchal, 282M away.

It was as I was preparing the boat for the ocean passage, putting away the fenders and coiling warps, that a conversation I had with Cormac in the National Yacht Club, came back to me. We were discussing single-handed sailing when I asked what was the most important advice he could give me. Cormac's answer, characteristically concise and pithy, was 'Don't fall off'. Now while I had the most up-to-date of life-jacket and a PLB that could communicate with satellites, I was still quite fearful, viewing the pushpit and lifelines with an uncharacteristic distrust. I plotted an alternative course which would bring me to the island of Graciosa, where I thought I might spend the night and reconsider.

But it was the boat itself, as if sensing my concern as it cowed the conditions with such mastery and comfort, that slowly restored my confidence. By late afternoon, well past the point when I should have tacked for Graciosa, the decision to proceed had been made, almost unnoticed; And what a beautiful

Ocean Blue leaving Playa Blanca, bound for Santa Cruz, Tenerife.





A relieved skipper as the sun rises after the first night at sea

afternoon it turned out to be, the yacht plunging into the long ocean swell in the fresh breeze and bright sunshine; But as the evening drew in, clouds appeared on the horizon, followed by a misty rain and ultimately squalls. The resultant reefs put the boat slightly out of balance, so while we were sailing high, she had slowed significantly. I was more worried about missing the dangerous rocky islands, Ilhas Selvagens, a few degrees to port of my direct course, than making miles, so I left well enough alone and settled down for the night. With 22/26 knots across the deck, the occasional wave breaking across the bow, lights appearing on the horizon that weren't always recognized by AIS, it was not a relaxing night.

Dawn brought significant relief, as much psychological as physical, as can be seen by the photograph above. With the first night out of the way, Ilhas Selvagens now 20M abeam, I shook out some reefs, balanced the boat better, bore off a touch and she took off. The trip turned into a joy. The second night, with fewer ships about, was much easier (although the knot in the first reefing line

had come free and had to be rethreaded), and by morning Ilhas Desertas appeared in the distance. Landfall ho! The last 20M into Madeira were a blast under well reefed headsail alone, white horses all around me courtesy of the wind acceleration zone. With no berths available, I was instructed to drop anchor. Tiredness made me irate, so I rowed in, using a bucket as a seat, and successfully pleaded for a berth later on that evening.

Madeira unaccompanied can be a joy, wandering around the mountains on a scooter, changing routes or stopping as I pleased, eventually reaching a peak and taking photographs of the sea through the clouds below me. For those of you who haven't visited it before, it is quite different to Lanzarote, with high mountains, steep gullies, luxurious vegetation, a halo of clouds, and very few beaches.

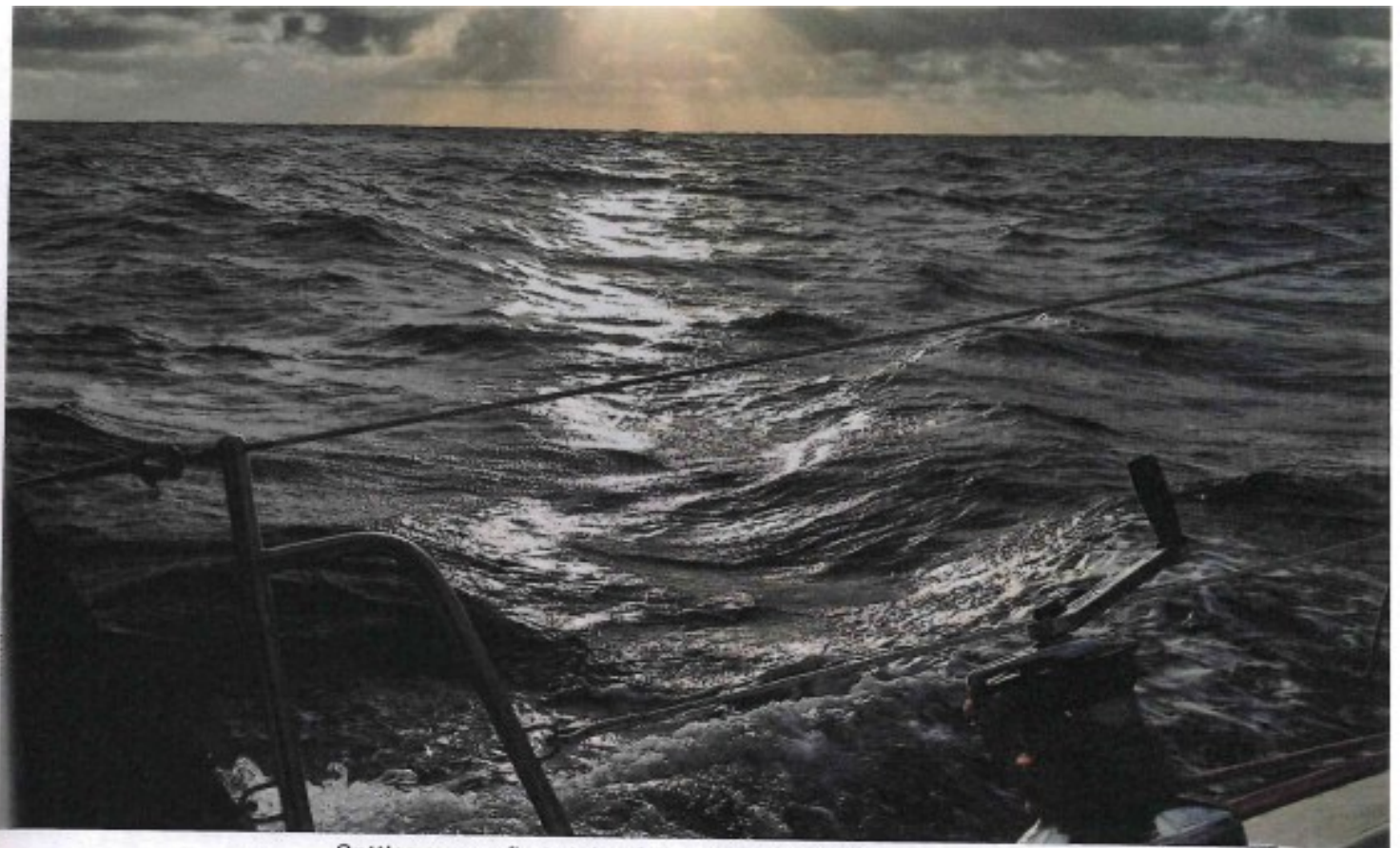
And back.

The trip home was delayed for 24 hours, following reports of 4m swells and 28kts en route. After a lazy breakfast overlooking Funchal marina, I slipped lines at noon the following day and pointed *Ocean Blue* towards the delights of Playa Blanca. Once clear of the wind shadow of Madeira, a fresh breeze kicked in and the yacht took off at a fair lick in the bright sunshine; champagne sailing, to the strains of Sgt Pepper and Abba's greatest hits; not a dissenting voice to be heard!

It was not to last, as the swell kicked in and breeze freshened once past Ilhas Desertas. That easterly component in the wind, so welcome on the way up, now turned what should have been a relaxing downwind romp into a more challenging beam reach. Yet, I was more confident on this homeward bound leg, settling into shipboard life much quicker. I managed to get the boat balanced more easily and prepared a hearty evening meal.

Funchal





Setting sun on first night of the return passage

At night everything on a boat feels louder, stronger, larger and wilder. That's how it felt the first night out. The swell was occasionally breaking over the boat, the winds increased to 26kts, so I was down to two reefs in both main and yankee, and full staysail set. Yet the boat felt hard pressed, and there was this unusual and regular bang that echoed loudly through the mast every so often, putting me in fear for the rig. I decided to put a third reef in the main, something that can only be done on deck. Sitting there at the foot of the mast beneath the boom, hauling in and securing the third reef while waves broke over me, as the boat blasted downwind in the bright moonlight and strong breeze, felt absolutely wild. The third reef was not the solution, the banging persisted, and the boat felt the lack of that mainsail. The reef was shaken out, following which I hunted around the boat minutely and eventually discovered the banging was caused by a block from the kicker, which was held too tight. Kicker eased, I made a cup of tea and suddenly everything downstairs was peaceful. Weird! The boat knows what it wants, and gets it.

The following morning I found that the topping lift had broken, limiting my ability to reef in the mainsail. To make matters worse the block had wrapped around the foresail meaning that I couldn't reef that either. The three hours it took me to fix that topping lift, requiring certain ingenuity to release, catch and re-thread that block, often having to re-thread lines already fixed, and the precarious balancing on the pushpit, do not bear relating here in detail. It would take too long and identify far too many errors. With daylight, I did a full check of everything on the boat and, feeling much more confident in her, I settled down to enjoy the day's sailing.

But it was that fourth night that was the joy of the whole trip. Everything may have been bigger and louder, but it was exciting. Blasting along at over 8kts in a boisterous sea under a full moon, white horses and spray everywhere and the music of the breeze in my ears, the boat all to myself in the middle of an ocean, I felt really alive. I spent an age standing on the cockpit seats holding on to the spray dodger rail, surveying the entire scene. The whole rig would appear to roll savagely from side to side in the bright moonlight, as the long keel and hydrovane cooperated to hold the yacht on course, as if to say 'All is in hand, you are surplus to requirements'. Another passage from Alec Rose's book came to mind. 'But why alone? you ask again. My friends, I was happy and content. I had all I needed. I had a good ship under me and I felt as free as the birds that circled above. I was king of my little world. I walked around the decks and admired everything. Then I looked at the sea. It was boisterous and playful. I admired it, but respected it, acknowledging king Neptune as king of the sea. Would he allow me to remain king of my sturdy yacht? Only time would tell.'

But all good things must come to an end! My carefully choreographed late departure designed to ensure I would arrive around mid-morning in daylight, was being undermined. Not for the first time *Ocean Blue* was going too fast. At this pace I was due to arrive at 0500, in the dark. The lights at Pta Pechiguera (FI(3)30s) duly appeared ahead of schedule and it was only by reefing early that I was able to delay rounding that point to 0600, 42 hours point to point. I covered the last five miles, just south of the island, slowly under engine, as the first glint of dawn appeared

over the eastern horizon. In fairness to them, Declan and Philip had been tracking me on Marine Traffic and were there to take my lines and give me a cup of tea. Despite all my years sailing, this was a whole new experience.

Conclusions

Modern boat building technologies, GPS chart plotters, onboard satellite communication facilitating up to date weather reports and route planning, solar panels allied with modern battery banks, EPIRBs, lifejackets armed with satellite personal locator beacons all contribute to enhancing the safety of this pastime we all enjoy so much, increasing the number of sailors who are now confident to venture offshore, even single-handedly. Perhaps the most important development is the advent of automatic identification systems (AIS) which, when it works, should allow single-handers to be more easily identified and avoided, a clear bonus when sleep is required.

A concern I have is whether such developments and the increase in global marine traffic create a different risk, an over-reliance on innovations to the detriment of old-fashioned seamanship. Watch systems on ships may be becoming slack, greater reliance being placed on radar/AIS alarms rather than rules and skills honed by generations of sailors. We are of course all sailors, and sailors by their nature embrace the risk implicit in any form of sailing. All sailing is a risk, single-handed sailing simply a little more so. No

modern technology can alleviate a simple accident or falling overboard, something which regrettably still occasionally occurs.

None of that, I am afraid, gets away from the pure joy of it, and the sense of achievement. Since embarking on these trips, I have discovered that there are many wishing to explore single-handed cruising. Somewhat like Cormac, many start with short trips, slowly extending their range as experience and skill develops. Yet no matter how long or short the voyage, it takes a certain audacity to simply let slip the lines and venture out of the marina bereft of any support or back up, relying exclusively on one's own resources and being 'prepared to stand or fall by his/her own decisions'.

If anything, my limited experience has led me to appreciate more the courage, resolution, seamanship and achievements of those ICC narratives I have mentioned above.

