

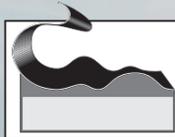


THE FAULKNER CUP

THE CLUB'S PREMIER AWARD

Maria's Atlantic Misadventure

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THE ATLANTIC TROPHY

FOR THE BEST OPEN SEA PASSAGE WITH PORT TO PORT AT LEAST 1,000 MILES



Approaching Porto Santo

Buying your dreamboat abroad during a pandemic, when it may not be possible to visit it in person, presents its problems. However, over the months before my solo trip back to Ireland from Portimão, Portugal to the intended port of Sligo, via the Madeira and the Azores archipelagos, I had developed great trust in the vendor. He had been superb in his assistance in prepping the boat - which had been out of the water for 2 years - taking deliveries of gear and sails by mail, receiving a pallet of my equipment from home, dealing with the horrible new customs arrangements as a result of Brexit, paying bills for me, and of course answering continual questions about the *Maria*.

As she, a 1975 Contessa 32, had been sitting on the hard for two years, and as requested by the insurance company, I had her fully surveyed including a rigging survey. I was happy with the reports and dealt with all the recommendations. I

added on board a drogue, a parasail sea anchor, an extra EPIRB (old one, though reregistered was out of date), a radar reflector, a new DSC VHF radio, an Iridium Go satellite phone system, and up-to-date flares including an electronic LED flare. There was an AIS receiver on board, but I fitted a small plotter with a built-in transponder. As a single hander I wanted to be visible by all available means.

My first devastating loss was prior to leaving shore, whilst prepping the boat. The satellite phone, which fell off the coach roof, wouldn't turn on again. The company said they would replace it when I got home; but I was now faced with no weather updates at sea or long range communications. I consoled myself with the thought that I'd previously made four solo unsupported circumnavigations of Ireland, by kayak, Laser, windsurfer and Drascombe LBC; and had crossed the North Atlantic alone in September/October (the wrong time of year...) with no weather forecast aids. Those exploits threw many challenges

at me, but I count myself determined and resilient. Surely a passage in June to Ireland would be straightforward by comparison? The journey was to test me beyond my physical and mental capabilities, with my determination and resilience so nearly holding to the end.

Things go wrong with equipment on any trip. An additional flexi solar panel that I had installed on the coach roof was degrading before departure because I had bent it too much. It was still 75% functional, but I couldn't foresee that both it and its partner on the Bimini would fail completely. This was no big deal as *Maria* has a fine engine, and I had also sent over a small generator for emergency power if ever needed. The near empty plane I eventually caught on May 18th (after many cancellations) was the first permitted from Dublin to Faro, Portugal, due to Covid restrictions. Fortunately my PCR test results arrived with just a few hours to spare not to be barred from the flight! My original intended crew had by now

resigned to the fact that they couldn't escape Jersey to join me; however I was quite happy to be alone. My preparation was often interrupted awaiting local technical assistance so there was many a long walk along the deserted pristine beach, pauses at near empty beachside cafes for gorgeous, cheap, rich black coffees and excellent grub of the sardine and fishy kind. Ten days prep in Portimão completed, hire car returned and *Maria* was at anchor across the bay ready for an early morning departure (0700 30 May) for her journey to her new home in Ireland. Time permitting it had always been my intention to go the 'pretty way' - the long way back to her new home port in Sligo.

The 455nm trip to Porto Santo in Madeira, nearly all under Neptune wind vane, was blissful and uneventful in winds up to F4, a wee bit of motor sailing when the wind was too light, and we, *Maria* and I, enjoyed a brisk F5 and F6 giving a tough, but great last day to complete the first leg of my journey



Maria, my 'new' old boat in Portimão

home in just 3 days 11 hours. The small marina in Porto Santo had been damaged the previous year in a storm and was vastly reduced in size, and it was therefore necessary to anchor in the harbour. An easy tender hop ashore enabled the necessary formalities checking-in with Customs followed by the continuation of my love affair with Portuguese coffee at the marina café/bar. A long walk the next morning on a deserted beach, returned me to the marina café. Coffee turned to beer as I was indulged

by an entertaining Dutch couple who shared with me their nautical adventures in Ireland and memories of being stuck in Sligo for a week for repairs and trying to get their laundry done.

I spent the afternoon touring the whole island in the company of a great, English-speaking taxi driver guide. The island was dry and arid, nothing like I had seen before. The highlight, apart from the wonderful views, was not what I expected and my reaction,

Porto Santo



though expressing surprise was not one of wonder as expected by my guide. It was the Pico de Ana Ferreira, an area of exposed columnar basalt similar of course to the Giant's Causeway, but well worth traveling to, unlike what some have said about our own tourist attraction.

On return, I topped up with spare fuel, getting a lift in another taxi to the island's only petrol station – with 80 litres tank capacity, plus 4 x 20 litres in cans gave me a motoring range of 400nm at 5kts. Ample for any emergency. The crossing to Santa Maria in the Azores was again fairly uneventful with winds to F5. Reefing main and genoa, changing sails from genoa to working jib, and reefing for a balanced sail trim in tune with the wind vane, sleeping day and night when appropriate and able, enjoying the sun and fishing for tuna astern were daily necessities and run-of-the-mill activities of the cruise. The fishing, however, was soon put to bed once I had seen the size of the tuna as they leapt through the air attacking shoals of sardines. The enjoyable 500nm crossing took just over four days and all was still well. A compulsory Covid test in a quarantine area in the marina along with other visiting boats cost 24 hours, but with the island being Covid-free I appreciated the need for such a delay before landing and going ashore. Confidence was growing with my ability to manoeuvre *Maria* in close quarters, though manoeuvrability in reverse was hard to achieve. In the marina at Vila do Porto I had to move three times, first from the inner old harbour wall, then to the quarantine dock, and thereafter to a berth, all thankfully without incident or assistance! A steep and strenuous walk from the marina up past the Forte de São Brás to the small town of Vila do Porto didn't put too much strain on my hip replacement or my other decaying hip joint, but was enough to generate considerable sweat and the need for a short sit down at a barbers and have a zero level haircut. Old cobbled streets with pavements decorated with nautical themes added to the attractiveness of the small town. A public holiday occurred the following day and all the buses seemed not to be running so I missed the opportunity of seeing more of the island.

From Santa Maria the following day on 10 June (1515) I set off on the next leg of my journey home to make the short hop of about 150nm to Praia do Vitória on the east side of Terceira. The wind was light all the way so I resorted to motor-sailing and motoring giving the auto helm, a Raymarine ST2000, a good test. No fault that I could see, apart from her cutting out of autopilot whenever a metal object came too close to her, which apparently is normal, though somewhat alarming at night when your head torch disables it and you veer off course dramatically! The

sea was still flat the next morning and I plodded on motoring at 5.3 kts entertained intermittently by a pod of 8 dolphins that kept returning to Maria to play. I arrived (1915 Friday 11 June) and berthed at the reception pontoon alongside a joint Swiss/Azorean expedition boat busy prepping for their departure to Greenland to study Cetacean movements for the remainder of the summer. Also on the pontoon was a 60' aluminium French boat, *Fredoya*, a global cruiser, busy sewing by hand their 85sq m mainsail. My entry to Terceira was eased by having sent an email of my arrival with a copy of my PCR test results taken in Santa Maria along with evidence of my double vaccination.

Terceira reminded me of home - small fields, stone walls, rolling hills and very green, unlike the parched, arid islands already visited. The marina is probably the most sheltered in the whole of the Azores. It is right by the town's two swimming beaches, totally protected by two massive breakwaters, which create an alternative very sheltered anchorage. I checked in the following day, swam, sun bathed, relaxed and caught up on some much needed sleep. The next few days were spent getting ready for the last leg home back to Ireland. The days passed by with daily

"My plan was to head north for a couple hundred miles to pick up a southwesterly airflow to Ireland. Little did I know that I would be faced with enduring northeasterlies"

checks on weather forecasts by screenshotting Predict Wind and studying the forthcoming wind strength and directions, giant burgers and beer at the nearby 'Budha bar', chatting to fellow sailors, victualling and topping up fuel reserves.

Wind was still lacking so I took a local bus to the main town on the Island, Angra do Heroísmo, a UNESCO World Heritage city. The bus wound its way through narrow country roads, often along the coast till it emerged into civilization, lovely parks, gardens, and of course the opportunity to look at hundreds of other boats at the marina. On return I met up with Pete Keeping whose charter boat had just arrived into the marina with his guests after a considerable number of days motoring. I thanked him for the rigging checks and work his son had done for me in Portimão via his rigging company. The evening was spent in the company of the French and Swiss boats treated with a laptop presentation of *Fredoya's* past adventures to Greenland. My last evening in the Azores I spent sharing beers, wine and craic with Mo and Mattis, owners of the *Contessa 32, Jingo*, who would shortly be setting sail for Crookhaven.

On the morning of the 15 June (0840) I slipped away from the pontoon and set sail for home having considered the up-to-date weather screenshots and discussed the forecasts with the other ocean sailors including Mo and Mattis. With hindsight I would have been better waiting a few days; however I was on a sort of loose deadline to be home by the end of June. My plan was to head north for a couple

hundred miles to pick up a southwesterly airflow to Ireland. Little did I know that I would be faced with enduring northeasterlies. Almost from leaving Terceira I was faced with headwinds, followed by calm, and progress was frustratingly slow for three days. By the night of my fourth day out, as I began to head northeast, winds were gusting 28-30 kts, and as I was contemplating an extra reef, when a line on the self-steering mechanism broke - tricky to replace under such conditions. Now with the third reef in, I hunkered down for a rough night under the guidance of the windvane. Sleepless due to the noise, cold and tired, I was taken by surprise when *Maria* suddenly shot to windward. The windvane had collapsed. I secured the flapping paddle and saw that the steel rod that connects the servo pendulum had snapped at its base. It was irreparable. I furled the rest of the genoa and put up my new storm sail. The boat and sail balance was better. I reverted to the auto helm, but it frequently cut out with the strain. I rigged lines from the tiller in through the cabin washboards to assist it. The gale continued throughout the day with little respite. With the auto helm continually struggling to maintain its compass course I hove to for the night. I slept well in four two-hour stints, though shaken awake each time by large waves pounding the decks.



Maria under storm jib

knew it was possible, but when one is cold, tired and exhausted, memory and logic do not fall naturally in place. I slept on it anyway and on waking picked up one of the many books I carried on board - Singlehanded Sailing - Thoughts, Tips, Techniques and Tactics by Andrew Evans. It all came back to me. Within 15 minutes I had her rigged with 'storm sail' steering to the tiller and I was cruising downwind at just over 120 degrees. I could make it home unaided, though my revised landfall would be Crosshaven in Co. Cork, where I could get a new auto helm and the wind vane rod welded for my journey onward to Sligo. The following morning there was a magical dawn bow, another phenomenon I had never seen before. Surely a good sign?

The wind, however, dropped throughout the day and by midnight I was becalmed. I motored for nearly five hours, then sailed a little so I could try to sleep. By early the next morning I had two reefs in the main, with the wind increasing from the NE. *Maria* and I were getting battered again. Little did I know that the F6-7 gusting F8 would go on for two days with little change in direction. I put up the working jib on the inner stay and managed better pointing. I was getting more tired, able to get very little sleep. Somehow a leeward lower shroud became detached, and the physical and mental effort to reattach it in the weather conditions, with a makeshift shackle pin, were taxing and further draining on my resources. I was pleased, though, with my working jib - it was well balanced with the two reefs on the main. But I was exhausted.

At 1400, in 50° 03' N 12° 28' W, about 120nm southwest of the Fastnet, with the wind gusting suddenly over 30 knots, there was a sudden loud crack, then stillness. The port capshroud U-bolt chain

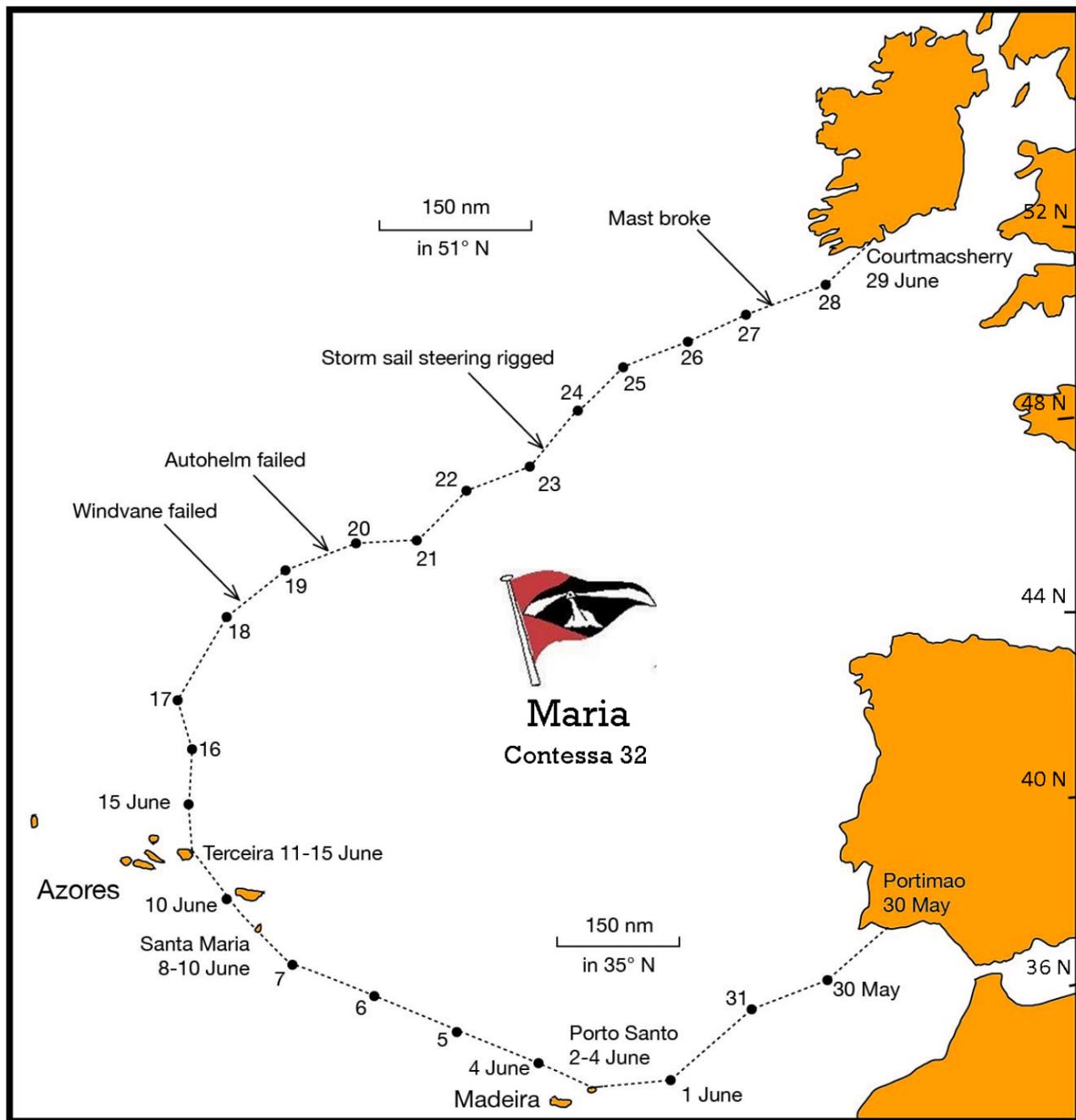


Increasing wind and mounting seas

plate had failed, and the mast had folded at the spreaders. Thankfully the genoa was fully rolled and the main appeared undamaged, and I managed to retrieve the working jib and secure the genoa and the upper half of the mast. By 1530 the engine was on and I was headed somewhere.

But I was gutted. I knew what this meant - steering by hand for a long way to make landfall. I was already exhausted, and now doubted my capability to come out of this misadventure. I had fuel and plenty in reserve, so perhaps I could make it, but I was already too tired to manage logical thought. If only I had just motored then slept, and then repeated, I might have made it unaided. I had decided to aim for Crosshaven, 190 miles, where I knew I could get help with the boat. I dressed in warm dry clothes, thick socks and dry shoes. This was comforting as I addressed my next problem - how to get fuel from the 20-litre containers into the fuel tank. There was no way I could pour it through a funnel at the deck level filling point as more seawater than fuel would have gone into the tank. So I removed the jubilee clip from the top of the visual filler gauge inside the port lazarette, attached a wider piece of tubing from a spare jiggler syphon, so that I could use another jiggler to decant the contents of the fuel cans to the tank. My log entries are at this stage scanty; however I do note that I switched her off and got two hours sleep. Also that my AIS had started working again after a few days of shutdown, but as my GPS's (all except that attached to my radio) had all gone down at a similar spot I thought there may have been some sort of naval blocking exercise. The recovery of my AIS was a relief during a time of increasing mental distress.

I brought up two cans from below to top up the fuel tank the next evening. I decided to put in only 20 litres, which should give me a further 50 miles, and add a further 20 litres in the morning. I'd been motoring at the helm for 36.5 hours. I was hallucinating - hearing voices, conversations amongst people I thought I knew. I was truly believing people were on board with me, perhaps helping me. I was talking back to them! I was visually hallucinating to the extent that I could literally see the shore, rocks or cliffs that I was about to crash into in my imagination. Notably this would happen to me within a second of waking, having nodded off at the helm. It was becoming quite perturbing - along with the voices. The Fastnet light was flashing on my beam. The wind was falling. I was nearly back in Ireland. I was on my last legs with over 1000nm travelled over two weeks with so little sleep. Then at 0600, following a beautiful sunrise, the engine stopped. The voices that I've been hearing for the last few days fall silent with their incessant chatter, and all is silent. I curse the silence and the voices' absence. I add the diesel I should have added the night before and attempt to start the engine. It obviously needs bleeding and I start to do it methodically. I fail time and time again and the starter battery gets weaker and weaker. I resort to my phone - which now has signal - and contact the previous owner. He is so understanding and helpful, but is unable to talk me through finding the fuel lift plunger, yet I have the engine manual in front of me. I collapse in exhaustion and cry; he reassures me on how well I've done getting so close to Ireland and that I should get help to finish my journey. I gratefully hang up, accept his advice and in tears seek help, too gone, too tired and drained even to remember how to get help. I phone Crosshaven



Boatyard Marina, whose number is sitting in front of me. A wonderful woman (Judy) picks up the phone. I break down again, and Judy is so kind and supporting. I give her my position and she looks after the rest, calling the RNLI. By 1300 the 29 June I'm ashore in Courtmacsherry following a tow in gentle seas the last 15nm through calm seas, and moored to the visitors' pontoon. The seafaring village of Courtmacsherry is full of character and characters

– a wonderful place with wonderful helpful people full of kindness – a place to which I shall return by land or sea. My grateful thanks go out to the crew of the of the RNLI Courtmacsherry lifeboat for the tow ashore, to the lovely Judy for relaying my position, to Norman Kean for his support, hospitality and assistance in making all arrangements for the care of me and *Maria*, and to the people of Courtmacsherry who befriended a distressed sailor.

Maria under tow from Courtmacsherry RNLI



ABOVE: 'Mind That Child'. Norman Kean -My saviour at Courtmacsherry

BELOW: *Maria*, safe but not sound at Courtmacsherry

