

RSA yacht to Paradise

AKA Never allow an umbrella on a boat.

John Margaron, 2012

Blondie Hasler started long distance solo ocean racing in 1960 with the first OSTAR from Plymouth to New York. There were 5 starters and as a tribute to them they all finished. Francis Chichester was first in his 40 ft boat, all the others being sub 30ft, Blondie's boat, a junk rigged folkboat was 26 ft and went on to compete in many solo races.

In recent years, qualifications of boat and Skipper have tightened and, in their wisdom, it was decided that sub 30ft boats could no longer enter. We were left in the unfortunate situation where JESTER could not even enter the events which she started! Thankfully there is a God; and a couple of independently minded and hugely experienced sailors started their own event called the Jester Challenge. The OSTAR has become a hugely expensive event and has certainly lost the spirit of the first race; Jester Challenge has regained some of that lost spirit.

It is very important for me to keep a boat on the mud outside my house in Southend, so I am limited to shoal draft. Six years ago I had a Superseal, which is probably the most fun monohull I have ever had. She was just a little a 28ft Kelt which was a great boat but lacked the feel of the Superseal. Four years ago I heard of the Jester Solo to the Azores so I entered that. I had a fairly uneventful trip, with 3 days of F6 on the nose, but she pushed through that ok. The problem was I had a new South Atlantic wind vane, which never worked, gave me a lot of worries and let me down badly. Nevertheless my time was a quite respectable sub 12 days.

Two years ago I decided to really go for it with a water ballasted Figaro - supposedly a boat built for the job and bullet proof. Because of their light weight, with a lot of wind and courage, they plane. The best I ever had with a spinnaker was 13kts sustained for 6 miles, then of course she broached big time. I left Plymouth for Newport, Rhode Island and after a couple of miles I had the spinnaker up for 52 hours in lightish winds. I had decided to go electric steering and had the state of the art reliable French system that all the Masters have, but for good measure bolted an an Aries wind vane.



Well you can guess the ending? (WUCGTE?) After 30 hrs the electric steering went. I have a computer sailing Guru who advised it was easy to fix - apparently it was a "bus problem", the only bus I know is the one I get on with my free pass! Well he sent me detailed sat phone instructions that even an idiot could follow. WUCGTE? - The thing is still broken. I then had 22 hrs of solo steering with the kite up, but I was making very good progress. Every time there was a "call of nature" or a breakfast bar to eat, or some custard to drink, there was a gybe. I was actually praying for it to come on the nose so the wind vane could cope.

I had a tough boat and decided to take the Northern Route, which is shorter but was going to be cold and sometimes stormy; but that only happens to Others. Wucgte? - On the seventh day and many miles towards Newport a storm came and of course it was on the nose. Bull in a china shop comes to mind when describing every aspect of my life; never get between me and my objective. There is no slowly, slowly catchy monkey or tortoise and hare. I was really sailing the boat French Style, ie loading all provisions, anchors etc into the only windward cot berth with no berth to sleep. I beat at 4kts into the F8 (ie full Gale), as you might imagine it was a bit bouncy. The weather deteriorated further, so I furled jib and had 3 reefs in main and went 90 degrees to wind. All the appalling stability figures came to my mind as I clung for 18 hrs to the internal rigging strut with the boat permanently at 30 degrees with it going to 60plus degrees every few minutes, I was fully expecting it to go over. I don't know what the maximum angle was but I lost my masthead antenna, light and anemometer. In the middle of the tempest the jib unfurled due to chafe and shredded itself in minutes. I plucked up courage to crawl down deck, and though in "survival suit" I picked up a lot of water, this led to Hypothermia and I was fortunate to limp back to Plymouth. I was bitterly disappointed and thought I was getting past it to let a bit of wind stop me. I am very harsh, if you still have a hull, a deck, a mast, a rudder and preferably a sail then you should carry on. I am a little cheered as Thomas, a fellow Jester (professional skipper of 10 years, 5 year circumnavigation and 13 transatlantics) said it was the worst he had ever seen and went on to describe the waves - I have a policy of never looking.

So on to the current Azores Jester. I bought a 30ft Parker (called a 31), because I can keep it outside on the mud and they have a reputation for being fast - though I can never sail her anywhere near the handicap; she also has well thought out accommodation. I think the boat is far from ideal for ocean passages - very few boats are designed with that in mind - they are designed for light occasional use in moderate conditions. Just look out at sea when it is inclement and see how many boats are out, and those that are out, how many hours will they actually be out? Jesters and other ocean sailors have a lot of rig problems, the boats are just not designed for it. This time I sailed 1500 miles hard on the wind; I was thinking that the average yachtsmen won't sail that in a lifetime. Analysing the boat I thought the mast to be undersized and bendy, the lifting rudder is also far from ideal for the ocean, and I was proved correct on both. I woke up on Start Day and noticed my Dear Wife had brought an umbrella on board. All Sailors know they are bad luck and I contemplated exorcising the boat, abandoning the event or cursing the wife; I don't know exorcism procedures, I wasn't going to abandon so I was left with the last choice. The pivot pin for the rudder is short but has a nylock, so I inspected it often; one day I saw the nut was two turns from dropping off with loss of rudder. Had I outwitted the umbrella curse? It was a difficult job leaning head first over the transom when beating at 5 kts to do it up. I checked it and tightened it several times - Now I am going to put a longer bolt with 2 nuts and I urge everyone to do so. For ocean sailing, where it is not required to pivot up, I recommend it is tightened hard to hold it all together. The keel coped well, though I had to stick a 4 by 4 inch timber down the keel box to stop it taking the bottom out if it capsized. Another real danger of fin/lift keels in these waters is hitting whales - it does neither party any good. This time I saw a pod about a mile away and they were jumping clear out of the water; as big as a double decker, creating huge splashes.



The start was at noon on 27 May, off Plymouth breakwater in very light winds. I always like rounding the first and only Mark to see who is in the contest. I was expecting Roger on a Dehler 29 to be up there, with perhaps a mini transat. Thomas an experienced racer on a Etap 30 had advised his was "a slow boat" so I was hoping he wasn't going to be there. We took different tacks but I rounded the Mark a few yards in front, we went on the same tack and we had very similar boat speeds and the "slow" etap was also there. There was certainly going to be a "Challenge" as to who would be first to Terceira. Suddenly a thick mist descended, there was a very scattered fleet of 30 yachts with a very worried cross channel ferry trying to find his way through them, frightening everybody with his horn. It was a dead beat to the Lizard, 40 miles distant. The westerly tack was by far the most favorable but was near rocky headlands and crowded with competitors, I figured that the land might interfere with windflow. I took an adventurous decision to tack away from the land. Just as I was doing so I saw a She 31, so the competition was increasing.

About 4 miles out, I could not believe my senses, I could see the inshore boats beating VERY slowly when I had a nice downwind sail. I decided to get Spinnaker up quickly, cursing the fact that it was multicoloured and they might cotton on. Well I could see their white triangular sails hugging the coast and I had 4hrs of Kite at 4 kts till the wind moved from East to South and I took it down. But such an advantage does not count for much in an event of this length; anything can happen at any time and the only certainty is that it will!

The Southerly wind held for a week and varied between F3 and F5, I was quite content as though hard on a Port tack I could make my course and averaged 5kts, which is about as good as you can expect in a 30ft boat. The week before the start I had developed a cold and was far from peak condition, so I spent my rest time on the lee saloon cushions. As I regained strength, I decided it would be more efficient to rest to windward. I rigged the leeclothes and lay down only for the fitting to come away and deposit me on the sole. I then tied the cloth directly to a handhold, lay down again and the rope gave. Though the leeclothes might look nice in a Boat Show, two short woodscrews to hold a fitting and inadequate rope are not good enough, people can easily be seriously injured with large claims for compensation ensuing - It just isn't good enough.

After a week I had done 843 miles, which is 67% of the straight line distance. In the unlikely event that conditions held there were only another 3 days to go! The problem from my point of view was that to date it had been a No Brainer, i.e. there had been no decisions to make except stay on the one tack and there had only been one point of sail i.e. hard on the wind. I had not found it challenging nor particularly uncomfortable except for the constant heel associated with the point of sail. The Aries self steering coped well, and there was very little in the way of sail trim except for occasional reefs. On day 8 the wind direction changed to South West, the exact course I needed to take; I could then sail due South or due West; now there were decisions to make that could cost considerable time. The few boats with reliable long range weather had a huge advantage. I had left my Satphone at home as I found when trying to get to America it interfered with my peace and tranquility, In any event nothing could possibly go wrong in a short trip to through the tranquil Azores seas?! I had no weather information, so if neither tack was particularly advantageous I would keep near the Rhumb Line I am not talking 20 minute tacks, I am talking 12 hr changes in tack. With the change in wind direction I was making similar speeds through the water but probably only 60% of the speed made good.

Things were steady until nearly midnight of the 9th day out. The wind was of course on the nose and it went from 10kts to 30kts in 10 minutes, quick reefs were required. I remembered deep in the back of my mind an old sailors lore that said that in summer if the wind rises quickly then it doesn't get too strong or last too long. I judged it to be a Summer Puff, and for once I was right, it only blew F7 (near Gale) and started to subside to F6 after 5 hours. To put things into perspective I was sailing into it and F6 is often called a Yachtsman's gale, and you generally find very few week-end yachts putting out into open water in these conditions. Because I was so far South I came off better than most, this depression deepened over the next 48 hours as it went up the Western Approaches and topped F9+ giving a large number of the Jester fleet a very tough time.

In the middle of the blow I came to realize I was due North of the Finish Line and that if I tacked I could fetch Terceira. I was very content sheltering below but anxiety drove me to change tack. In the darkness and conditions I judged it would be easier to attempt a gybe but she was reluctant to move so I pushed the tiller very gently and she tacked very easily, I was now on the home straight. I was in a fine mood at 8.00 AM and felt for certain I would be eating a steak and drinking a very cold beer that very evening, the weather was manageable, the course good and the worry about the Umbrella was superstitious nonsense. For some unknown and one off reason I became fascinated with the waves. Although the wind had dropped the waves were still f7 waves, they seemed to be remarkably regular, evenly spaced, even heights, very ordered; they reminded me of rows of soldiers advancing on a parade ground. I developed a new for me way of estimating their heights, I stood at water level and looked out of the window estimating my eye to be at about 5ft, I estimated the heights to be 4-5 metres which I later found out agrees exactly with the Almanac for F7. This fascination with waves was unprecedented, particularly as they were not breaking and not banging the boat about too much.

The past couple of days had been fairly lively and it had been imprudent and impracticable to contemplate using the heads, but now the wind was down a bit it was time to address pressing

matters. I was sat on the heads and happened to be looking at the kettle when suddenly there was an enormous explosion, the kettle jumped, did a double somersault, hit the deckhead and landed back on the stove. The boat had obviously fallen off the top of a wave. The force can probably be calculated from the fact that a spinnaker pole which was tethered at the front jumped up and got caught in rigging 6 ft high. The noise was terrific and I made a quick damage assessment below and on finding everything apparently in order I then dared to look on deck. To my dismay I found the mast had broken, this was not due to pressure of wind in the sails but due to compression shock. The Umbrella won.

I was in a right mess and there would certainly be no Steak and cold beer that night! The wind was still blowing strongly away from the Azores, the nearest land being Lisbon 800 miles away which was likely to take 20+ daunting days away. But look on the bright side at least I wasn't sinking and with tight rationing I probably had enough water and provisions for 60 days. I made a quick calculation that if all went well I might have enough fuel to motor to safety, provided I could push against the strong wind. First priority was to sort out on deck. In the conditions I would lose ground very rapidly and easily put myself out of fuel range. I immediately put a drogue over the stern and held the tiller over to keep me broadsides to the wind, I was pleased that in the 5 hours it took me to sort things out I only lost 2 miles down wind. The Genoa was badly torn and dragging in the water and the furler was badly bent and stuck high off the deck, these had to be arranged to reduce drag and windage. Two 6 ft sections of tethered mast were scything through the air just above head height, remembering the sea conditions, it was a dangerous occupation to try to capture and secure them. After about 14 hours one of them chafed itself loose and thankfully fell harmlessly to the sea.

Eventually it was time to start the engine, which thankfully worked and unexpectedly managed to push me at 3-4 kts towards Terceira. The wind continued to blow F5-6 all the way, but it was 40 degrees off the bows. I was now hopeful that I would reach the safety of the islands, but as the water is several thousand metres deep there would have been no prospect of anchoring and local rescue services appeared non-existent, I monitored every beat of the engine and could only relax when I entered Praia Harbour and when I had done so I was the happiest man in the world.

As I reached the Marina I was expecting there to be 2 or 3 Jester participants to take my lines and was amazed to find I was the first arrival. I was expecting others to arrive any minute and after 2 days they started to arrive. Losing the mast was a great disappointment after such a trip - but to be honest I was pleased to be alive, to be uninjured and to still have a boat. My time Plymouth to Azores was just under 11 days, the clearing up and loss of speed through motoring had cost me 12+ hours.

The Jester Challenge prides itself in not having entry fees or Rules, but in fact they do have a few rules particularly concerning use of engine. One rule allows use of engine in "Mayday" situations. With serious gear failure, such as broken mast, good seamanship requires the vessel to seek refuge in a safe haven by the most effective means; in my case it was only sensible to attempt motoring to Terceira. Another Rule allows motors to be used to meet time schedules etc when a time penalty can be imposed. I offered a time penalty and the result was that the Parker was first to finish.

As always I had a great time in the Azores, the Islands are not overly warm and sunny but they are unspoilt and lovely and the people are friendly and know how to live. Unfortunately masts do not grow on trees anymore and it is a very long job to get a mast shipped out to remote islands. I then had the job of getting home so, as a distressed British Seaman, I worked my passage up to Bergen on a large Norwegian yacht. Readers will remember the wind was on the nose all the way there, so in theory it should be an easy trip back, WUCGTE? Yes; the wind was from the North all the way home. That's sailing folks!



I thought I would put together some thoughts on how to get to the Azores reasonably quickly:

1. Get a boat that is capable of making progress in virtually all conditions to windward. Remember that virtually all smallish boats are not built or designed for continuous punishment.
2. Get a decent windvane that works.
3. Don't carry excess weight, in my case I emptied the very large forward water tank and carry water midships in 2 litre recycled plastic bottles.
4. Do not oversail the boat, I have no electronic instruments. I use an inclinometer, somebody advised me never to sail a Superseal over 15 degrees, I think the bigger Parkers can take a bit more but not over 20 degrees. Listen to and feel the boat, it should rarely bang due to waves. The more you sail solo, the more you should be totally in tune with the boat and the conditions.
5. Yachts should be sailed by sail trim and rudders are only there to change direction. Ideally rudders should do nothing, using them slows you down and puts strain on the steering. My windvane was of course connected to the tiller and as there is no human feel it can be difficult to gauge steering pressures. I do so, often from the companion way, simply by observing whether the tiller is amidships and observing tensions in the windvane ropes. If the rudder is having to work then adjust the sails. Sailing to windward, several times I discovered the windvane had become disconnected and the course was still being held - proof of a well trimmed boat.
6. Draw a line on the chart between start and finish and stick near to that line. In this case The Lizard is the only navigational hazard, stay a few miles off that. The course takes you 70 miles off Ushant and 300 miles off Finisterre.
7. Study routing and weather charts. The relevant charts show South Westerly winds, with low frequency of gales and high frequency of calms. The weather I experienced was as predicted but thankfully didn't have the calms this time.
8. My little Rutland wind generator produced ALL the electric I needed as I have LEDs, no electronics and get all my navigation information, speed and course made good from an Icom AIS transponder which I think is a lifesaver.

