

The Atlantic Adventures of Sassie Lassie

Bill, George and I left Rosemarkie very early on the morning of 1st May 2008 to be driven to Glasgow Airport by Anne, my long suffering wife, for the flight to Orlando Sanford Airport. Arriving in Sanford early afternoon after an uneventful flight, we picked up the hire car and drove, mostly on the Florida Turnpike, to Miami, stopping only for a snack en route.

I had been to Miami twice before and had little difficulty in finding the villa on Venetian Causeway, behind which Sassie Lassie was moored. The view from the villa was spectacular backing straight onto Miami Bay, to the left Miami Beach, to the right Downtown Miami and next door, supposedly, John Travolta's villa. Michael and Sandra, who owned the villa, and from whom I rented the mooring, were friendly and gracious hosts, allowing us to use their swimming pool and guest toilets/showers in the house. Michael had been a famous phsycologist, amongst other things, and Sandra had been a ballerina and model, both had retired but Sandra continued to teach ballet. Michael kept fit and active at the age of 92 by swimming 300 metres every day, playing chess and backgammon, surfing the internet and exercising his wonderful dry sense of humour at every available opportunity.

Paul, a brit who lived in Miami, had done most of the preparation of the boat, a Hunter Legend 40, for the Atlantic crossing but there were still items that needed attending to, and this was done over the course of the next few days.

The fourth member of our crew, Alex, was supposed to fly into Miami on the 2nd of May but instead , was bumped off his original flight onto another heading in the same general direction, arriving at a different airport, but with his luggage still on the first plane. Alex then spent the next three days trying to be reunited with his errant bags, his biggest problem being to find a human being who worked for Air Canada, at Miami airport. He sat waiting for his bags to be delivered, for the whole afternoon on the day before our departure, but they did arrive eventually much to everyone's relief. Whilst Alec was waiting on the front veranda for his bags to be delivered, Michael, who had asked George to buy a splitter for his telephone, tried to get aboard the boat to repay the money he owed George. We were not aboard at he time and unfortunatelly, Michael lost his balance and fell in the water, fully clothed, but being the man he is, swam round the boat and climbed up the dock ladder. He lost his watch and wallet in the water and, although not responsible, I did snorkel round the boat looking for them but without any luck.

Provisioning for the trip was mainly achieved by a visit to the local Wal Mart for the dry and tinned goods, two big shopping trollies full and overflowing. These included pasta and rice in copious quantities, tinned meat and vegetables, condiments, sauce mixes and everything else required to keep us fed for two months, together with an adequate reserve for unforeseen eventualities. Fresh meat, salad, vegetables and other perishables were purchased the night before departure at a local Publix store.

The morning of the 6th May dawned with bright sunshine reflecting on the bay and a distinct lack of wind to trouble the surface of the waters. Michael and Sandra had risen early to bid us farewell and take some .final photographs. The pontoon was slipped at 8.30am and we motored west up the bay towards the Miami Herald building a couple of miles away. On reaching the intra-coastal waterway we turned south under the MacArthur Causeway Bridge with only three feet of air draught to spare and then headed east down the Main Channel, where the big Caribbean passenger liners normally tied up, to the open sea of the Florida Straits.

We left the engine on until 10.30am, heading north east to Gulf Stream, 6 miles offshore, then tried

to sail but the wind was too light and variable, so after an hour the iron spinnaker was hoisted again and remained on until 6.00am the next day. The wind freshened in the early hours of the 7th May but it was coming out of the north east, directly on our nose. Later on that day, the wind veered round to the east and strengthened again, so we were sailing at last. George called me to look at a waterspout (a tornado over the water) and asked what to do. Avoid it, I advised, and luckily, it dissipated before coming too close. The sight of the waterspout reaching from sky to water and other spouts trying to form from the line of clouds, but never quite reaching all the way down, was magnificent.

Unfortunately the genoa halyard decided to take this opportunity to part near the mast head and disappear down inside the mast. I believe this was due to the clutch for the rope not being properly secured when we had bent the genoa onto the forestay in Miami. Luckily the sail was reefed so we left it that way to stop it from falling down and for the next few days, always keeping a couple of turns left on the forestay.

We reached the northern limit of the Bahamas around midnight and turned further east and pointed towards Bermuda.

The 8th May was blessed with heavy rain which pointed up the deficiencies of the seals around the forward hatch above Alex' s bunk, but with good winds from the south east at force 4/5. All Alex' s bed and clothing were quite wet but we could do nothing about it yet.

The 9th May we found our first flying fish on deck, two during George' s watch and one on mine. There were also spectacular electrical storms all around us, luckily non coming close enough to hit us.

The wind died early in the evening of the 10th May so on came the engine and we continued motoring for the whole of the next day. The lack of wind and calm seas gave us the chance to do some repairs. Some of the sliders had come out of the mast track so down came the main sail to reinsert them. We also took down the genoa and attached another halyard, making sure this time that the line was good and tight when the sail was hauled back up.. Alex was able to dry his bed and clothes with the hope that, after Bill and I had masticked and duct taped the forehatch close, no more water would come in.

It was also the time that we were adopted by a small bird who had obviously been glad to find us as it was not a sea bird and was 300 miles from the nearest land. We assumed it must have been carried out to sea by the wind and had been flying continuously for some time as it appeared exhausted. After recovering somewhat and accepting a few crumbs of food, it tried to fly off but got no further than a couple of hundred yards before returning. It did this a number of times before appearing to decide that it was preferable to stay with the boat. The little fellow then made himself very comfortable eventually plucking up the courage to go below to explore. He obviously found things to his liking as he assisted Alex with the cooking, perched on top of Bill' s head when he was trying to get to sleep and perched on my toes when I went to lie down. Alas, the next morning he was found dead on the floor next to Bill' s bunk with, as George colourfully described, his insides squeezed out like a tube of toothpaste. Somebody had stepped on him during the night. Nobody confessed to this crime but we had our suspicions.

Around 6.00pm on the 11th the wind started picking up from the south, reaching force 5 by midnight. At 6.00am on the 12th the wind built to a force 6 and increased to force 7 over the next 3 hours, the seas increasing in height all the time. After abating for a few hours the wind picked up strength again until by midnight it was blowing gale force 8. The 13th continued in the same manner so that by 11.00 am all sails had been taken down and we were running at 7 knots under

bare poles in a westerly gale. George used the satellite phone to contact Bermuda Harbour Radio to ask about the weather and was told that gales were expected in our area, which came as no surprise as we were in the middle of them, and to continue for the next 48 hours. They advised us to keep them apprised of our situation if matters took a turn for the worse.

It was about this time that a vicious cross swell started building, which arrived every 6th or 7th big wave, and while not the size of the main swell, added to the complication of steering. One of these cross swells hammered into the side of the boat whilst I was on the helm and filled the cockpit with water, knocking Bill onto the side deck where he was stopped from going through the rail by the spare diesel cans. The wind continued to increase and by 2.30pm the decision was taken to start the engine as we were too far south of Bermuda and needed to make a better course, with the waves on our port quarter. The seas by this time were mountainous but manageable so long as they were not breaking. I had taken the decision earlier to double up on watches so that the man coming off watch, stayed on deck with the next man to help and keep lookout aft. After the engine had been switched on, I sat looking back at our wake and noticed that if the top of a wave was breaking, as soon as it hit the wash from the propeller, it smoothed out. It did not lessen the height of the seas but made them less dangerous.

Unfortunately, we did suffer a knock down during this period, although exactly when I could not say as it is not recorded in the ship's log. Bill was on the wheel and George was with him in the cockpit. I was below trying to get some sleep when I was thrown from one side of the cabin to the other. On the way my thigh hit the compression post, leaving a nasty bruise for the next few days. I was lucky not to have broken any bones and popped my head up through the hatch to see what was happening. The two of them were still there, having been clipped on by safety lines, struggling to partially deflate their life jackets, which had activated and were preventing them from doing anything but basic steering. Luckily the engine had kept going during the few seconds that we were on our side although water did get into the battery compartment via a lazarette which had been left undogged.

After the knock down, we continued to make progress towards Bermuda, the wind reaching a peak of 40 to 50 mph, with waves up to 40 feet in height. The night drew in and with it came driving, blinding rain. The compass light decided to stop working at this time so we had to use a torch to illuminate the binnacle. The route into St George's Harbour had been programmed into the handheld GPS, and we held the right course until picked up on the radar screens of the harbour authority, who then guided us in through a narrow passage bordered with shoals. The lights on the buoys were difficult to distinguish, with visibility at times down to a few yards and when further into the harbour approach, all the lights on the shore creating a confusing background.

We anchored in the calm of the harbour at 4.30am on the 14th of May, poured ourselves a couple of small(ish) drams, then went to our bunks for some well deserved rest, relieved that we had survived the worst storm any of us had experienced on a yacht.

We later counted ourselves lucky to have arrived on that day as the storm continued for another two days with wind speeds in excess of 70 mph. Several yachts arrived with severe damage or had to be towed in.

The next morning I radioed Bermuda Harbour and was told to report to immigration which required a short motor to Customs Quay. As we all had UK or Canadian passports this did not present too much of a problem although I had to surrender the two flare guns which had come with the boat.

After dealing with the formalities, we left the quay to find a place to stay for the next few days and as we motored west further into the harbour, I noticed a number of yachts tied up alongside Nemo's

Quay. We made our way to the quay and asked a person aboard one of these boats if it was in order to tie up there and how much it would cost. To my delight, we were informed that berthing there was allowed and would not cost anything, the only proviso being that if a cruise ship required to tie up there, we would have to move. As it was, we stayed there for 10 days absolutely free and in an ideal spot as it was only a short walk into town.

George and Alex left the boat that day to find a hotel whilst they waited for their flights out of the island and we awaited the arrival of our new crew member, Neil, who would be with us for the remainder of the journey.

Bermuda is expensive and it seems that almost every square inch is built on with houses with white rooves and pastel coloured, painted walls. The rooves were white because Bermuda has very little in the way of natural fresh water and every building has a water tank below it with a rain water collection system. The bus service was excellent, although a little nerve wracking, as the drivers seemed to know everyone along the route, and most of the local passengers, talking and chatting whilst whistling along inches from rock walls.

We had to make some repairs whilst berthed in Bermuda, mostly arising from the knock down, which was why we had to take the bus to visit the chandlers in Hamilton, the capital city. A city it was, the same way cities everywhere are full of noise and hustle and bustle. I found little to recommend it compared with the more relaxed attitudes of the locals of St Georges and the community of yachties.

By the 19th of May, the day Neil arrived, we had completed repairs and were ready to depart but the weather was not at all favourable for another 4 days, during which time we relaxed, visited Alex in his hotel, did the tourist bit by visiting the Crystal Cave and had our clothes washed at the laundromat.

We set off from Bermuda, having cleared immigration the night before, at 8.00am on Friday the 23rd of May and were sailing as soon as we left harbour. The wind was from the north east, the direction in which we wanted to travel, until 6.00pm when it backed into the west, where it stayed until midday the next day, when it backed to south west. This enabled us to make a good course until 6.00pm on Monday the 26th when it swung back into the north east again. During this time, the main bilge pump stopped working, which Bill fixed by a bit of rewiring, and the engine would not start, due to bad battery connections, this time repaired by Neil. We had unfavourable winds, albeit much lighter, for the next two days and decided to motor on our chosen course rather than sail in the wrong direction.

When I judged that we were approximately half way across the Atlantic, we had a ceremony of throwing a bottle containing a message, overboard. One of Bill's grandchildren had come up with the idea and written the message, with his address on it, to see where the bottle would end up. Dolphins would visit most days but the passage was mostly routine watch keeping, chores and reading.

This pattern of winds, some helpful and some unhelpful, continued for the rest of this leg of the voyage although in the later stages it was mostly in the south or south east. This forced us much further north than we wanted and resulted in beating into the wind and sea from the 6th of June until our arrival in Flores on the 9th of June, which was most unpleasant. We became so sick of the constant banging that we lay to the sea anchor for 6 hours on the 7th of June just to get some rest.

Our first sight of Flores was made by Bill, who thumped on my cabin ceiling, shouted that he could

see a lighthouse and asked what he should do. Not hit it, was my sleepy reply, but I made my way up on deck and directed him to proceed south along the coastline. It is very difficult to judge distances of lights in the dark so when I took over the watch, I made sure that we remained a good distance off the shore until we had enough daylight to see it properly. After three hours, Neil came on watch, by which time the island could be seen clearly and the sails were taken down and the motor started. Eventually we rounded a headland and could see the concrete wall of the harbour. We were all extremely glad to make port and proud that we had successfully navigated the longest passage of the journey. Our first view within the harbour was of many boats lying to anchor with two yachts tied up to the wall on the south side. There was room for another boat in front of these so we made our way in and threw lines ashore to some helpful people. What we had not appreciated, in our relief at making harbour, was that a vicious six foot swell moved along the harbour wall, throwing the boat up and down and onto the concrete. Within seconds the forward mooring rope had ripped off a cleat and a dent was put in the pulpit rail. Neil, who was the first to realise what was happening, shouted to cast off and pull away from the wall before any more damage was caused. Luckily we were able to anchor in the harbour without any further incidents. We all stood down, unshipped the dinghy and headed straight for the nearest bar.

Porto de Lajes, which was the name of the town and harbour, was a fairly small settlement built into the side of hill running down to the harbour. There were numerous narrow streets and alleys but it was quite clean, the buildings, with their traditional red tiled rooves, tidy and the people were friendly and helpful. It boasted a magnificent church, two mini-supermarkets, an ATM, a filling station, a laundry several bars, a couple of restaurants and a library with free internet access. Everywhere in the village were deep gullies in the native rock, over which buildings and bridges spanned, which reminded you of the volcanic origin of the island.

Our first day, after climbing the steep hill leading up from the harbour, was spent wandering about, finding out where all the facilities were located eventually ending up in a bar not too far from the harbour. We hired a car and toured the island, which is only 20 kilometers long, visiting the larger town of ??? to shop at the hardware store, then onto the north coast before turning back and heading inland. We took an unmade road which headed upwards into the clouds and continued until we reached the caldera for this island but visibility was so poor nothing much could be seen. We continued on and came down out of the cloud into much flatter terrain of the island's agricultural, west side, ending up back at the port having completed a big circular tour. Whilst we had the car, the opportunity was taken to refill the diesel cans at the garage towards the top of the village, rather than having to carry them for a considerable distance. After visiting the laundry several times we did at last find it open and arranged to have the clothes delivered back to our favourite bar although I did end up with somebody else's tee-shirt.

Customs formalities were not at all arduous with the policeman visiting the harbour on the second morning just as we were coming ashore. He was quite agreeable to us going to his office the next morning with all the necessary paperwork.

Towards the end of our stay, we took the opportunity of leaving a mark of our visit on the harbour wall, in the traditional Azorean way, by spray painting the boat's name, our names, the date and that we from Cromarty Boat Club.

Not being unusually superstitious, we left Flores at 12.15 on Friday the 13th June 2008, with a pleasant south westerly wind of force 3 to 4, heading for Ireland. Light winds from the same direction or westerly, continued for the next two days when they veered through north west to north and finally to north east by the 16th when we found our first squid on deck. The 17th continued in the same manner, with the wind veering south east, south and back to west, where it continued for

another day. The same pattern of fairly light winds, from various points of the compass, continued until the early hours of the 24th when a southerly gale started building just as we were approaching the Fastnet Rock. I telephoned George and asked him how long it was going to last, to which he replied, for another twenty four hours. So the decision was taken to run for Baltimore Harbour in the south west of Ireland, rather than continue to Kilmore Quay in the south east, as had been our original intention. We tied up alongside at 18.45 and repaired to a local pub at the top of the harbour for a pint of good Irish Guinness, which is the best I have ever tasted.

At that point came a wonderful feeling that we had successfully crossed the pond and were pleasantly surprised to receive congratulations from quite a few of the customers in the pub. That had been the last of the long passages and for the rest of the journey, we could get reliable forecasts and, if necessary, miss any more bad weather by putting into port.

Whilst we were at Baltimore, I heard that my aunt was very poorly so I took buses to Cork and flew to Gatwick where my wife picked me up and we visited my aunt in hospital. After one night I returned and found that in my absence the Garda had visited the boat and asked if we were smuggling illegal substances because of the line of spare fuel canisters on both rails. Neil assured them we were not and they left quite happy.

We decided to move on after four days as another gale had been forecast for three days later and if we missed this weather window, Neil would be late returning to the RFA. So we left Baltimore on the 28th of June, sailing in a brisk south westerly wind and making very good progress. As we against the clock, whenever our speed dropped below four knots, the motor was turned on but the sails were kept up. At 06.20 on the 29th, we rounded the Tusker Rock and headed north up the Irish Sea still with the wind in west or south west but much lighter. We saw the more shipping that night than in the whole of the rest of the voyage and the morning of the 30th saw us approaching Scottish waters, after passing close by the Northern Irish shore. We arrive at Ardrishaig at 21.35 in the calm before the storm and in pouring rain made our way to the nearest pub where we spent a couple of hours getting wet on the inside.

The next morning, the predicted gale arrived together with lots more rain and we spent seven and a half miserable hours traversing the Crinan Canal. At the first lock, a fairly inexperienced skipper, with his wife and daughter had problems and ended up going in backwards so we decided to push on quickly and leave them behind. All the locks on the Crinan are manually operated with very large and heavy lock gates, not helped but slippery mud underfoot when trying to open and close them. I am sure that the canal is very beautiful in good weather but have to admit, for me, that was the worst day of the whole trip.

We wanted to leave Crinan as early as possible the next day, so as to try and reach the Calendonian Canal before 18.00 and get inside the sea lock gates. The lock keeper agreed to put us through at 09.00 and turned up the next morning at that time and asked if we were ready. I turned the key in the ignition and nothing happened. Neil dashed down below, whipped off the engine access hatch and after a few minutes said try it again. This time the engine fired up and we set off through the Crinan sea lock and north towards Loch Linnhe.

The wind was on our stern and we only put out the genoa at the start of this leg but later, as the wind died away, the motor came on. We reached the Corran Narrows, and concerned that we were going to be too late to get into the sea lock, I radioed ahead and asked what time they finished for the day. To my surprise, the lock keeper knew the name of the boat, said that they were expecting us and, even if we were a few minutes late, would make sure we entered the canal that night. After we entered the sea lock, Murdo arrived to greet us, as he was on his own boat in Bishop' s Bay, and we learned

that he was the one who had informed the lock keeper of our imminent arrival. We treated ourselves to a Chinese take away and a couple of beers that night.

We made it through the Caledonian Canal in, what was for us, the record time of two days with the only one noteworthy event. The only time, in over 4,000 of sailing, that we were held up, other than by the weather, was at the railway bridge below Neptun' s Staircase. The bridge had a hydraulic problem and was not able to be opened for a couple of hours. During the wait, a steam train passed by heading for Mallaig and I talked to the Swedish couple on the boat, named Uterus, moored ahead of us. Of course, I had to ask the question as to how their boat came by its name and was told that, they had been on the boat two years, where down below it was always dark, damp and warm, so what else would you call it.

At the other end of the canal, in Muirton Basin, my wife arrived with the van and we took the opportunity of unloading most of the kit, spare diesel cans and other items no longer required. The next day, we left the canal through Clachnaharry Sealock and headed up the Inverness Firth straight into a nasty force five directly on the nose. Being a small firth, the waves were very short and steep and we banged into just about every one of them. Once round Chanonry Point, the swell became longer and more comfortable and there we were joined by George, who had sailed down from Cromarty on his own boat, to accompany us on the final leg. Just before the Sutors, we were also joined by the Invergordon Life Boat, with Danny at the helm, who very helpfully played celeidh music through his loudspeaker system.

Arriving in Cromarty, we put the boat on the mooring and George ferried us into the harbour where we were greeted by a large number of relatives, friends and well-wishers.

Lessons learned

Make sure all halyards are tight.

Do not rely on the crew on an unfamiliar boat. Check everything yourself.

Make sure all hatches, ports and lazarettes and properly dogged closed when at sea.

Programme all destination waypoints into all chartplotters before leaving harbour.